**Delusion of Fate**

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# Delusion of Fate

by mnz

Summary


Luke Castellan had lived once before. Back then, he was a she, and she'd read a certain book series where gods were real and monsters ran wild.

It was a fun read.

Living it? Not so much. Especially as the villain.

No problem, though. Luke had a plan: don't act like book!Luke. Free will, right? Easy.

…Except Fate, when it's an actual entity, doesn't like being ignored.

(Note: Roman gods ≠ Greek gods.)


Notes

Hello everyone!

This is my first work and English is not my first language, so I apologize in advance for any mistakes that can appear.

The timeline begins when Luke is 9, so canon events won't start until he's older. In canon, he met Thalia and Annabeth at 14, and I'll be following that logic—with the first book taking place when he's around 19.

And just so you know, the gods in this fic lean more uncanny (creepy, even), and I've taken some liberties, especially with the Roman side. They're not the Greek gods in different outfits or alternate personalities. They're distinct. Also, the pairing is intentional. If that's not your thing, that's totally okay—this is an AU, so consider this a gentle heads-up. 🤍

See the end of the work for more notes

# Chapter 1: Childhood - Exile

Chapter Notes

Edited

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Luke stared at the statue of Hermes in his mother's overgrown garden, weeds curling around its cracked base. Behind him, her screams carried through the house again, sharp enough to make the windows rattle. Those wild, unnatural green eyes of hers never failed to send a chill down his spine.

Sometimes he wondered… why was he still here?

He knew the story.

Luke Castellan had run away at nine, found Thalia Grace and Annabeth Chase, made it to Camp Half-Blood… only to betray them all—for justice, for righteousness, for rage—and die a hero.

A sacrifice that ended up meaningless, because nothing really changed. The books that followed only proved it: gods still using demigods however they pleased.

But he wasn't that man. That was the belief he clung to when his mother's fits left bruises on his arms and her words carved dread into him. She raved about some terrible fate, a prophecy he could never outrun, then faltered, shifting into broken fragments that made no sense, as if even she didn't know which truth she was voicing.

When he was younger—more hopeful—he'd believed she was wrong.

He wasn't the same Luke Castellan. He had lived another life, long and full, a self already formed before this body ever drew breath.

But some things hadn't changed: his mother still sought the Oracle, his father still abandoned him, and the shadow of fate still loomed.

If he left… would history just repeat itself? Would he die a second time, a puppet dancing on a Titan's strings?

He didn't know. So he stayed.

With a sigh, he lowered himself before the statue of Hermes, weeds brushing his knees.

He despised the god, but the garden was quiet here, calmer than the chaos inside. Sitting by the stone figure was practical. Maybe not what you'd expect from a child of Hermes, but Luke had been someone else before he was ever Hermes's son. And that, to him, made all the difference.

He pulled a book from his bag, one he'd borrowed from the school library, and tried to focus on the words that kept swimming across the page. One of the many annoying traits of this new life, not unbearable, since he could still read well enough (a leftover gift from *before),* but clumsy compared to what it should've been. A shame, really, because he actually liked reading.

Books were his friends. Between their pages, he could pretend for a little while.

"Luke! Oh, my poor, poor, beautiful boy! What did he do to you?"

His mother's voice cut through the calm, yanking him back to reality.

Sometimes her incoherent screaming broke apart into clear sentences that somehow still made no sense. Who was "he"? Kronos? Someone else entirely? And what would actually happen if "he" came? Luke had no clue, and not knowing was the part that always left him on edge.

He tried to bury himself in the book again, but the screaming started up once more. He knew he'd have to go inside soon, stop her from hurting herself.

No nine-year-old boy should have to take care of his unstable mother.

Tilting his head back, Luke glanced at the statue looming over the garden. Hermes, in all his naked glory—a mortifying sight he wished he could unsee. Luke had no interest in his father's bits, but he still squinted up at the statue, trying to figure out what exactly his mother had found so irresistible.

Sure, Hermes was handsome enough, Luke guessed. But that couldn't be it. His mom's attachment couldn't be explained by something that shallow.

On her good days—which wasn't saying much—May still wasn't the woman she'd been his first year of life. She'd run her fingers through his sandy hair and tell him, almost wistfully, how much he looked like his father.

But her eyes always betrayed her—soft, distant, fixed on someone who wasn't him.

She leaned too much on a man who wasn't even here. She hadn't used to be like that. Luke knew.

And the version left behind made his chest ache every time. He swallowed it down anyway, just to savor those rare flashes when she seemed almost herself.

Mom used to be funny. Free-spirited. Clever. She'd read with him when the letters tangled, play when no one else bothered, spin stories about her travels whenever he asked. That woman—the one who loved him—was gone, replaced by a grieving, unstable wreck.

His earliest memories held her bright and smiling, her hair the same sandy shade as his. But that person? He didn't recognize her anymore.

And in those moments, he hated his father most. She loved the man who left more than the son who stayed.

"My son!" she wailed suddenly, her cry shaking the house. Wood groaned, the wind howled through cracks. *Unnatural*. "Oh, my son, run! Go, run from—from…" Her scream broke, sharp enough to make Luke flinch. "Monsters! So many monsters! A life, an eye, a *fate*!"

Luke clenched the book in his hands, mourning the loss of his so-called peace. But really, had he ever known peace in this life? What was there left to lose?

He stood, brushed the grass off his pants, and set the book on his battered bag. Then he trudged toward the house, each step dragging under the weight of her unholy screams.

He tried to distract himself with the scenery instead. The house looked like one of those colonial buildings—not the Brazilian kind he remembered from a life past, but still old. And big.

Sometimes Luke wondered how they even managed to live here. His mom was in no state to work, so either she had some secret inheritance or, more likely, his father was the one paying the bills.

*Hermes keeps us here but doesn't even bother sending anyone to take care of her,* Luke thought, judgmental.

The street itself was quiet, almost forgotten, with only a few other houses scattered between the trees pressing in from all sides. Sometimes there were monsters in the shadows. Sometimes the strange man. Today, there was neither. It should've been a relief, but instead it only made the dread crawl higher up his spine.

He stopped at the walkway, clicking his tongue to cover the unease gnawing at him.

*Creepy junk,* he thought.

The toys his father had left scattered along the path hadn't aged well. Sun-bleached dolls with cracked faces, stuffed animals with one eye missing, cars with paint long gone. They seemed to watch him anyway, button eyes following each step, like they knew something he didn't. Like they understood his mother's nonsense better than he ever could.

Then, the screaming stopped.

A chill shot down his spine. Luke tore his gaze from the toys, ignoring the goosebumps crawling across his arms, and hurried toward the door. His grip on his backpack tightened when he noticed the faint green glow leaking from the cracks.

His stomach dropped.

*Mom's still in the middle of an episode.*

He pushed the door open, and the smell hit him first—dust, and something scorched that stuck to the back of his throat.

Inside, the house looked like it belonged in a horror movie. Silence pressed down, broken only by the low buzz of a dying bulb overhead. That sickly glow leaked through the hall, staining the faded wallpaper. Every step made the floorboards groan under his shoes, the sound sharp, too loud.

Swallowing hard, Luke moved quietly, careful, the way experience had taught him.

*Find her before she finds you.*

The memory of her crazed eyes and crushing grip only made his stomach twist tighter.

A sound to his right froze him in place. Heart hammering, he cursed under his breath and crept toward it, clutching his bag like a shield.

He found her in the kitchen, looking deceptively normal. Sunlight streamed through the open windows, birds sang, and May Castellan sat in the glow as if nothing were wrong at all.

But Luke knew better.

His mother's eyes were wide and unblinking, green like poison, fixed on something only she could see. Her gray hair hung in messy strands, her clothes wrinkled. At her feet, charred-black cookies littered the floor beside the fallen baking pan. A faint glow clung to the kitchen walls, nearly hidden by the sunlight.

For a moment, Luke wondered if it was Apollo's way of apologizing for May Castellan's condition. But that was only wishful thinking. The gods were always humanlike, and always in the worst ways.

He wrinkled his nose when he noticed the miniature caduceus clenched in her hands. It didn't surprise him. Their house had long since turned into a shrine; of course she would pray to Hermes in her hour of need.

Shame he never answered.

Approaching with care, Luke laid his hand over hers, gauging for the slightest flinch. When she gave none, he slipped the replica free with practiced ease and set it back at the feet of Hermes's image.

Her sudden touch on his shoulder made him jolt.

He turned slowly, forcing calmness onto his face even as her unnatural green eyes bore into him.

The Oracle had not yet let her go.

"My wonderful boy." Her voice trembled as she cradled his face between her hands. "Remember all those poor, beautiful souls!"

Her grip tightened, frantic, the sickly glow swelling until it drowned out the sun.

“Do not involve yourself! Heed my words, hide from their gaze!”

Luke panicked. He grabbed her wrists, trying to pull them off, but the harder he struggled, the more agitated she got.

Then, all at once, she yanked her hands away like she’d touched fire. Her arm slammed into the little Hermes figure beside them, knocking it over. The sharp crack as it broke cut straight through the moment.

The glow flickered out. Her eyes softened, gray again.

“Mom?” Luke whispered, uncertain.

“You’re fine, you’re fine,” she murmured, pulling him into a desperate hug, trembling from whatever she had seen.

He hugged her back silently, words stuck in his throat. The unease that had shadowed him all day only worsened, as though something significant had just been set into motion.

The hairs on his neck prickled. The birds outside went silent. And in the corner of his vision, just beyond the window, he saw them—

Three women, standing across the street, silent, spinning a single thread.

Before he could react, his mother shifted, deliberately blocking his view. Her eyes—clearer than he’d seen them in ages—locked onto his.

“You must leave, Luke,” May Castellan said. The words tore from her throat, her face twisted in agony.

“Why?”

He’d thought he could avoid this. That if he stayed, if he did things differently, the story he already knew wouldn’t catch up to him.

That he wouldn’t be forced to live it.

He wasn’t some kid carrying a grudge over an absent godly parent. He had once been a grown woman who’d long since learned not to expect more than people were willing to give.

But he’d been naive. The Moirai would keep spinning their threads, no matter the material.

“It’s not safe here!” his mother burst out, her voice trembling. She sucked in a shaky breath, tried to steady herself, and pressed on, “You must go to Camp Half-Blood. It will be hard, yes, but safer. Little could reach you there without consequence.”

“But why can’t I stay?” Luke shot back, more petulant than he meant to. For all the years he carried inside him, he still sounded like the nine-year-old boy he looked like. “The creepy

toys Dad gave you were supposed to protect us!"

"They won't last forever," she snapped, fear sparking in her eyes. "More monsters show up at our door every day, and they aren't the only ones haunting us."

Her nervous glance pulled his eyes to the window.

The street outside looked ordinary—trees swaying, a neighbor's window creaking open to catch the light, birds perched on a streetlight. But the three women were gone. What lingered was the silence they left behind, heavy and wrong.

All living things held their breath in the presence of the Fates.

"Go pack," she said, her voice softer now but no less firm.

Luke didn't argue.

He moved like he was underwater, feet dragging him down the narrow hall. The walls seemed to close in the farther he went, plastered with yellowed newspapers, little trinkets that all tied back to Hermes somehow—his sacred animals, the Hermès fashion logo, even some random mail carrier's badge. A small altar had been crammed onto a side table, stacked with offerings long gone stale.

Above it hung a framed picture Luke figured was a traditional depiction of Hermes, the kind you'd see painted on old Greek pots—curly-haired, smug, mid-stride with a smirk.

Rarely did any other faces appear. A photo of his mom here. One of himself there. But the house was steeped in Hermes, saturated with him, so much so that Luke couldn't help but wonder if the god owned them outright—even when he wasn't around.

By the time he reached his room, the daze had settled in for good.

The Moirai were never a good sign.

On autopilot, he stuffed necessities into his battered old backpack, hands moving without thought. Then he stopped, his gaze drifting across the room. His old drawings still clung crookedly to the wall. On the bed lay the worn blanket he couldn't sleep without. To the side stood the polished wooden dresser, older than Luke himself—counting both lives.

Who knew if he'd ever see any of it again?

His eyes landed on a faded family photograph. He picked it up, holding it carefully, almost reverently. His mother beamed in the picture, sandy hair pinned back with a pencil. Beside her, Grandma Aparecida wore a faint, knowing smile as she cradled a much younger, scowling Luke in her frail arms.

He remembered that day. He had been barely more than a toddler—his father already gone for three years, his mother still herself. They had shown up at Grandma's house without warning, and she had opened her door without hesitation.

Those few weeks had been the best of his life.

Almost without thinking, he slipped the photo into his bag.

Shouldering the backpack, he gave his room one last lingering look before stepping out. His mother was waiting in the living room, standing tall, a magnificent bronze sword cradled in her hands. Her stance was proud, but her eyes betrayed sorrow.

She beckoned him closer, unsheathed the weapon, and held it out.

It fit his grip like it had always belonged there. He traced a finger down the gleaming edge. When he looked up, his mother's sadness was a mirror of his own.

"Your father left this for you," she said softly. "I kept it, waiting for the right time to give it to you. I just… never thought it would come so soon."

Luke didn't answer. Instead, he reached for her hand. She squeezed back hard, her voice trembling as she went on.

"I thought I could protect you. It had to be me. Your father is immortal and—for all his promises—I knew he wouldn't stay."

She knelt until her eyes were level with his. "I've always been able to… *see* things. I thought if I saw more, I could shield you better." Her voice broke into a whisper. "But I was wrong."

"I forgive you," Luke choked, letting the sword slip from his hand as he wrapped his arms around her. "Eu te amo, mãe[1]."

Her tears, long dammed back, finally spilled as she clung to him.

"Também te amo, meu príncipe[2]."

They stayed like that for a while, holding on because neither wanted to let go. Eventually, his mother pulled back, sniffled, and told him to wait. She disappeared into her room and came back with a camera. Luke didn't protest. He just stood there and let her click away, photo after photo, like taking enough pictures could freeze time.

When she was done, she pressed a folded map into his hands. A route was drawn in bold red, impossible to miss. He traced it with his finger—red so his dyslexia wouldn't trip him up.

Her eyes lingered on him, heavy with sorrow, as she guided him to the door.

"Be safe," she whispered, the last flicker of her sanity burning out as she let him go.

Luke's heart sank as he watched it happen.

May Castellan slipped into the prison of her own mind, but not before making sure her son had a chance to survive.

For all her faults, he could never hate her. Not when she was as much a victim as he was, both of them nothing more than playthings to beings they couldn't comprehend.

"Mom," he said softly, fighting back tears as his hands wrinkled the map, "your favorite show's about to start."

She didn't even seem to notice that her son was packed to leave.

"Yes. Yes. Don't stay out too late, Luquinha[3]. Not too late," she murmured, her face eerily calm as she drifted back inside. Whatever clarity she'd had was already gone, swallowed up by the haze of her visions.

Maybe it was better this way. If she'd cried, he wasn't sure he could've made it out the door.

Tears streamed down his face as Luke Castellan walked away from the only home he'd ever known in this life. He didn't let himself look back until he was sure he'd put enough distance between him and the house.

When he finally did, his stomach turned. Against the dark, the building glowed with that sickly, all-too-familiar green. A man approached—the same figure who'd always lurked at the edges of Luke's life. He stopped at the door, head lifting, scanning the streets like he could feel Luke's eyes on him.

Luke didn't stick around to watch. He ran.

Chapter End Notes

Here's the translation of the portuguese parts:

[1] - Eu te amo, mãe : I love you, mom

[2] - Também te amo, meu príncipe: I love you too, my prince

[3] - Luquinha: little Luke/Lucas

# Chapter 2: Childhood - Hunted

Chapter Notes

Edited

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"I think I got a case of Brazilian Soul…" Luke hummed under his breath, eyes skimming the newspaper. His voice barely carried over the quiet street.

It was early—too early for school kids or commuters. Just a few shopkeepers setting up, the occasional dog-walker. Luke preferred it that way. Fewer people to wonder why some odd little boy was sitting primly on a bench, reading the paper like a miniature adult.

A few days had crawled by since he'd left home. Now he was in Greenwich, close enough to New York that Olympus and Camp Half-Blood felt almost within reach. Close enough, too, that he couldn't help wondering if monsters would start sniffing him out more often.

So far, luck had been on his side. The ones that had spotted him, he'd managed to shake—darting down alleys, slipping onto buses, vanishing into crowds. Maybe his scent wasn't strong yet. Or maybe he was just that sneaky. Probably both. He was a crafty not-quite-nine-year-old, after all.

But luck didn't cancel out the knot in his chest. Fear, anger, misery—all tangled into one heavy ball that threatened to split him open every time his thoughts drifted back.

*Home*. Ugly, tormented, and suffocating. But home all the same.

Luke peeked over the edge of his stolen newspaper, eyes flicking across the street. An old woman shuffled past, slow and deliberate.

He studied her without moving his head. Rich, he decided. The coat gave it away—too fine, feathers glossy like they came from some unlucky bird of prey. Pretty sure that was illegal.

He was just weighing whether she'd be worth the risk when he noticed it. The coat didn't sway right. It clung to her like skin, every feather shifting too organically.

*Harpy*.

Luke swallowed a curse, rolling the paper tight in his hands like he wasn't bothered at all. He'd let himself drift too far into his thoughts lately, and it was going to get him killed.

Standing, careful to look bored, he slung his backpack over one shoulder and strolled in the opposite direction. The woman's—no, the harpy's—gaze tracked him, hawk-sharp, burning

between his shoulders.

Luke kept it casual until the corner. Then he bolted.

Her shriek ripped the morning air a beat later.

The empty streets betrayed him now. No shops open yet, no crowds to swallow him up—just the echo of his sneakers on pavement and the shadow swooping closer overhead.

He needed a plan. *Fast*.

Luke's mind raced. His sword was in the bag, but reaching for it meant stopping, and stopping meant death.

Claws raked the air—too close. The harpy's swipe snagged a strap of his backpack, jerking him forward so hard his knees almost buckled. He stumbled, flailing like a newborn foal, and forced himself back into stride, lungs burning as his eyes scanned for cover.

Above him came a burst of shrill laughter, high and grating.

"Run, little thief! Run faster!"

Her glee crackled in every birdlike giggle. Luke's suffering was entertainment to her. This was all a game.

His jaw clenched. No—she wouldn't have him.

He cut left sharply. The harpy shrieked as she overshot, wings slamming her into a wall with a crack of stone and feathers. Luke's lips twisted into a fleeting smile at her rage echoing behind him.

He just needed to vanish for a moment. That was all.

And then—*luck*.

A parking lot sprawled ahead, dotted with vehicles. Perfect. He vaulted the fence and hit the ground running, sliding under the nearest car. The zipper rasped as he yanked his bag open, bronze sword flashing into his hand.

Just in time.

The harpy slammed onto the asphalt, the impact rattling the frame of the metal frame above him.

Luke held his breath, every muscle coiled. The sword's hilt was slick in his grip, his heartbeat so loud he swore she could hear it.

Talons scraped concrete. The monster prowled closer—then, without warning, she flipped and dove straight into the car opposite him. Metal shrieked as glass shattered.

*Now*.

He slid along the line of vehicles, keeping low, while the bird-woman tore through the lot. Her shrieks mixed with the rising wail of alarms, a discordant song of fury and steel.

“I will find you, little demigod! I will tear you apart!”

*Tough luck, pigeon.* Luke wouldn’t be caught so easily. His mother had taught him one lesson that stuck: never let someone find you before you found them.

The hunter had become the hunted. And she didn’t even realize it.

Reaching the end of the row, Luke slipped into the open. The air felt wrong against his skin, every inch of him exposed, but he ignored the instinct to duck back. Rising into a crouch, he edged closer, eyes locked on the threat.

The parking lot looked like a war zone. Doors ripped off their hinges. Hoods caved in like paper. Cars gouged so badly they barely looked like machines anymore.

In the middle of it all, the harpy raged—talons carving metal, wings battering glass—too lost in her frenzy to notice him at first.

And most importantly, she was across the drive.

Luke stepped into the open, silent but deliberate, his sword angled steady before him.

“Excuse me,” he said, voice low, his stance settling as if his body knew what came next. “I’m afraid we have to end this here, Lady.”

The creature froze mid-swipe. Her head cocked sharply, an avian twist too precise to be human. Then her lips peeled back in a smile—far too wide, her teeth far too sharp. Her yellow eyes fixed on him with pure, burning scorn.

“Yes,” she hissed. “Yes, demigod. The end. Your end.”

Her wings snapped wide. In a breath, she was airborne, talons extended, cutting straight for him.

Luke ran to meet her, pulse hammering. There would be no second chance. He needed perfect timing or he was meat.

The world narrowed—sword, heartbeat, the predator screaming down at him. Nothing else mattered.

At the last instant, Luke dropped low, sliding across broken pavement. Talons tore the air above his skull. His sword shot upward on instinct, striking true. The blade passed through her like paper.

There was no blood.

He shut his eyes, bracing for gore, and opened them to find the air full of drifting golden dust, already scattering on the wind.

Luke pushed to his feet. Wordless. Hollow. The adrenaline bled out of him in a rush, abandoning him like an unfaithful friend. In its place came that gnawing numbness, a weight pressing from the inside out.

How fitting. The harpy had tried to tear him apart; his own nerves were doing the job better. A laugh—sharp, hysterical—scraped at the back of his throat. He swallowed it down.

Was this it? His fate—to keep fighting, bleeding, clawing just to prove he deserved to exist?

The thought cut deeper than talons. A sudden pang bent his knees. God, he missed home. Missed it before he'd even opened his eyes in this life. Missed his dad's rough voice, the clumsy reassurances that never quite landed but always mattered. Missed his mother's laugh, the way she could pull light out of him no matter how dark he felt.

All of it gone. Locked away in the only place he still had them: the silence of his own mind.

And now, being torn from his second home so suddenly ripped the wound wide again, reminding him it had never really closed.

Logically, he knew leaving was inevitable. He knew it was the right choice. None of that mattered. The blow landed square in his chest anyway, and he'd ignored it as long as he could. Ignored it until it rose up, demanded to be felt—and nearly got him killed.

A bitter chuckle slipped out. He tipped his gaze to the wreckage around him. One slip of thought, one breath of grief, and a monster had pounced. That was all it ever took.

Then the sharp wail of sirens cut through the quiet, chasing the dust still hanging in the air. Somebody had heard. Somebody had called. Of course they had.

Luke moved fast, shoving his few things together, muscles already stiff now that the adrenaline had fled him. He scaled the fence—clumsier than before, sneakers scraping metal—and cursed under his breath as he dropped hard on the far side.

The street was mercifully empty. No neighbors gawking, watching a too-small kid climbing out of a demolished parking lot.

*Or maybe not.*

Luke's gaze snagged on the row of townhouse windows. Blinds tilted, glass glinting just enough to make him wonder.

Watching? He couldn't tell. But the prickle at the back of his neck told him not to linger.

Hands shoved deep in his pockets, he hunched low and quickened his pace, slipping through side streets and doubling back so many times he nearly confused himself. Nearly—but not quite. Hermes' blood wouldn't let him get lost.

At least the deadbeat god was good for something.

Luke ducked into a narrow alley and pressed against the cold brick, chest heaving. He slid down the wall until his knees hit the grit and a dented container hid him from the world. Only then did he peel the backpack from his shoulder and fold it tight against him, as if its worn straps could keep him anchored.

The silence pressed in. The ache in his chest split wide.

And finally, finally, he broke.

A ragged sound tore from his throat, muffled as he buried his face in the bag that still smelled faintly of home. All the grief he'd stuffed down came surging back—grief for what he'd had, grief for what he might've had. It spilled out of him in sobs that burned his ribs, raw and helpless, echoing in the dark like something wounded.

He sobbed for his mother first. For the way she had sat alone in that crumbling house, her mind splintering, her hands still busy in the kitchen, baking cookies for a boy who would never walk back through the door. The thought sliced through him like glass, leaving him choking on it.

Anger followed. Hot, strangling anger. At Hermes—the man who vanished when May needed him most. The god who let his most faithful worshipper scream his name into silence. The father who had stamped Luke with this curse of a half-life, setting him loose in a world that would never stop hunting him.

He cursed until the words broke into sobs, until his throat was raw and his chest hollowed out, until nine years of tears finally clawed their way free.

When the storm emptied, only silence remained. His cheeks were wet with tears, his eyes dry and burning. He tilted his head back and saw that Apollo's chariot had already wheeled far across the sky. The streets beyond the alley buzzed with voices and clattering dishes—lunchtime, maybe. The world was moving on without him.

He knew what came next. He should get up, find food, change his clothes, figure out the train to New York. The police would be sniffing after him—someone must have seen something. But his body felt heavy, pinned to the concrete, too wrung out to stand.

And then, from somewhere deep in memory, his father's voice surfaced. Not the god's voice—the other one. The first, real one. Rough and impatient, impossible to ignore.

"Our people are, above anything else, strong. When we fall, we stand up and try again. Now stop crying."

The words landed like a hand on his shoulder.

The memory jolted him out of his stupor. Luke dragged himself upright on legs so numb they barely felt like his own. For a second, he swayed—but his father's voice still echoed in his ears, steadying him. He whispered a silent thanks to the man long gone.

He'd be fine. Eventually.

It had felt… good, in a twisted way, to let everything out. But the alley wasn't safe. Not with monsters sniffing the air after the chaos with the harpy, nor with cops probably circling the block, looking for a kid who fit his description.

He had to move. He had to get to Camp. He had to live.

Luke brushed the dirt off his clothes, tried to pull his shirt straight, and push the wrecked look off his face. A boy who looked like he'd escaped from an asylum would draw stares, and stares meant cops, and cops meant monsters.

He stepped into the flow of the city, slipping into the crowd like a drop into a river. Mortals brushed against him, their scent clinging to him, smothering that demigod tang monsters loved to track. It worked—he'd once even fooled a satyr, and they were supposed to be expert trackers.

And crowds had another perk. His hands moved like second nature—brushing coats, skimming pockets, slipping wallets free before anyone blinked. The suits were the easiest. Too busy, way too smug, and entirely too sure no street kid would dare touch them. They never felt the loss. Luke's pockets, meanwhile, grew heavier with each "accident."

In his defense, it was survival. Train tickets didn't pay for themselves, and some things couldn't be stolen without trouble. If the Lord was watching, He would surely look the other way.

The rich lost nothing, Luke got to keep breathing.

Satisfied with his haul, Luke slipped out of the river of bodies and ducked into a department store. Fluorescent lights buzzed overhead, the air stale with dust and air refresher gone sour.

No cameras. *Good*.

Three employees slouched by the counter, glassy-eyed with boredom. Their gazes flicked over him as he entered—one sharp beat of suspicion—then dropped away like he wasn't worth the energy.

He let out a breath, slow. Tension bleeding, but not gone.

Keeping low between the aisles, Luke palmed chips, candy, anything small enough to vanish into his waistband.

Undignified, he knew.

His eyes stayed on the staff as he drifted into clothing. He didn't need much. Just one change, clean and different enough. Whoever had called the cops earlier probably hadn't gotten a clean look—but mortals were unreliable witnesses with the Mist bending their brains. He wasn't about to bet his life on their memories.

He yanked a shirt off the rack: white, cartoon birds lined on a wire, “little birds” scribbled underneath. Cheesy but passable. Into the bag it went. A pair of plain jeans followed. In and out.

To seal it, he grabbed one of the chocolate bars he’d lifted and strolled to the counter. An appropriately childish purchase. Better than walking out empty-handed.

The cashier plucked the bar and coins from his hand, eyes flicking up. Luke’s heart stopped. His pulse thudded in his throat. Escape routes lit up in his mind—front doors, side exits, back hallway—

The man smirked.

“You ditching school, kid?”

Luke blinked. Oh. Right. That.

He swallowed, let his shoulders hunch. “Y-yeah.”

The guy laughed, loud and easy. “Must be your first time. No wonder you’re so nervous!”

He bagged the chocolate like Luke had just given him the best story he’d get all week.

If only—Luke’s eyes flicked to the name tag—Mr. Ditcher knew what he had actually done.

“Don’t worry, don’t worry. I won’t snitch. Wouldn’t be fair when we used to do the same thing all the time. Right, Jerry?”

Jerry gave a vague nod, eyes glued to the magazine in his hands. He probably hadn’t heard a word.

“Here, kid. Don’t get caught.” Mr. Ditcher winked as he passed the stolen chocolate back like it was communion bread.

*May the Lord bless his strangely perceptive soul,* Luke thought, tucking the bar away.

With his haul secured, he finally made for the train station. The streets had thinned, the kind of empty that made every sound echo a little too loud. After the harpy, he wasn’t sticking around for a second encore.

Thankfully, the station wasn’t far. He slipped into one of the bathrooms, double-checked they were empty, then peeled off his filthy shirt. The sink soap was harsh, industrial, but he scrubbed his face and arms anyway, watching the grime swirl down the drain. A quick change into clean clothes—cheap but new—and his reflection shifted.

He gave himself one last look in the mirror. Less like a street rat, and more… something closer to human.

Passable.

“I’m a million-dollar baby. Don’t at me…” Luke hummed under his breath as he trudged out of the bathroom, his voice echoing down the tiled hall.

He checked the clock.

Then checked again.

*Too late.*

Luke nearly sprinted to the ticket counter. Mercifully, it was quiet. The woman behind the glass barely looked at him as she slid the ticket forward. No questions about why a kid was buying a ride to New York alone. Maybe it was apathy, maybe boredom, the same glazed-over routine he’d seen in the department store. Either way, it worked.

He had a ticket. He had an escape. For a moment, that was enough.

Luke was so giddy he almost skipped toward the platform, barely restraining himself. Which was why he plowed straight into someone.

His first mistake was turning around.

The second was staring at the not-so-subtle pair of horns trying—and failing—to hide beneath a newsboy cap.

“You’re the demigod that’s been disappearing on me!” the goat-man exploded, his face flushing from red to an alarming shade of purple. “Do you know how long I’ve been searching for you? One second you’re there, the next—gone! And then I hear about a parking lot getting destroyed, and I just know you’ve got something to do with it!”

“I’m sorry…?” Luke tried, lamely, already shifting his weight to edge away.

The satyr huffed, nostrils flaring. “Don’t play dumb. You’re too slippery to be clueless. You know what you are. And I’m tasked to help people like you.” He jabbed a thumb at his own chest. “So, for the love of the gods, just let me do my job.”

“Mister, I don’t even know who you are.”

The satyr blinked, as if only just remembering basic introductions. He didn’t even bother to look embarrassed.

“I’m Dean Forrest, and I’ll be accompanying you to New York.”

“Luke Castellan. And we just met,” Luke shot back flatly.

Dean smirked and fished something from his pocket. He dangled it inches from Luke’s nose like a trophy.

A ticket. To New York. Same as Luke’s.

“It seems you’re stuck with me, demigod.”

Luke stared at him, incredulous.

Outsmarted. By a *goat*.

Chapter End Notes

If anyone is interested, the song Luke's singing at the beginning of the chapter is called Brazilian Soul by The Knocks.

And… Luke isn't dealing with the fact he was basically kicked out of his house very well.

Besides that, he's been living his thug life™ era.

Furthermore, Dean Forrest, our exasperated satyr friend, demanded to appear. Man really be seizing his chance on catching the gremlin.

# Chapter 3: Childhood - New York

Chapter Notes

Edited

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Come on, little bird. Follow me,” Dean said, his grip still clamped around Luke’s arm like he was afraid Luke might vanish into thin air.

Which was almost offensive.

“Alright,” Luke drawled, dragging his feet just to be petty. “You realize I can walk on my own without being hauled around like a shoplifter, right?”

“And let you pull your disappearing act again? Not a chance.” Dean snorted, steering him through New York like Luke was already on a wanted poster.

Luke was a criminal, technically. But that wasn’t the point.

“Then stop calling me little bird, at least.”

Dean grinned, eyes flicking to Luke’s shirt—the one he’d mocked the entire train ride. Apparently a faded sparrow logo was enough to earn Luke a nickname he’d never shake.

“Can’t do, little bird. You tick every box: cute, tiny, and annoying.”

Luke made a face. “You missed deadly.”

“Uh-huh. Deadly like a sparrow pecking a loaf of bread,” Dean shot back.

Apparently, Dean was the satyr Luke had ditched days ago, hiding his trail so cleanly the guy almost believed he was a normal mortal kid. Almost. Satyrs were stubborn, though—resilient trackers trained to sniff out monsters and half-bloods. And Dean had taken Luke’s escape personally, chasing him across the city until dumb luck and a crowded train station finally gave him the win.

Who knew goats could hold grudges this long? No wonder they were the Enemy’s symbol.

Luke eyed the back of Dean’s shaggy head and couldn’t resist.

“A cute, tiny bird can’t be annoying,” he said sweetly, twisting the knife. “Maybe your eyes are going bad. Or is your nose finally giving out?”

Dean’s nostrils flared like a bull about to charge. Victory.

“And there you go—chirping nonsense, proving my point.” Dean stopped dead, let go of Luke’s arm, and jabbed a finger in his face. “I’ll have you know I have one of the best senses of smell among the Protectors. I can track a half-blood across three boroughs, through smog, and hot dog carts, and—”

“Whatever,” Luke cut in, already slipping out of reach with a shrug. “Don’t you have to take me to Camp Half-Blood? Let’s move it, goat-boy.”

Dean stared at him, then muttered a string of curses under his breath as he stomped ahead. Luke only caught the “little shit” and “smartass,” which made him grin wider.

The satyr had funny reactions. Too easy. Luke liked him already.

Dean’s shoes slammed hard against the pavement with every step, but he didn’t falter. For all his sulking, he clearly knew where he was going. Luke trailed behind, hands in his pockets, quiet for once. If Dean had forgotten his earlier paranoia about Luke running off, Luke wasn’t about to remind him.

For now, he followed.

The satyr could probably smell monsters before Luke even spotted them, but habits died hard. One slip was all it took. He had no interest in another harpy incident—once was more than enough.

The vigilance wore him down. Paranoia clung like a second skin, and it was exhausting. What kept him moving was the thought that it was temporary. By nightfall—if luck held—he’d be at Camp.

Safety, or at least the closest thing half-bloods got.

*If you live that long,* a voice whispered. He shoved it away.

Luke forced his mind on the streets instead. First time in New York—this life or the last—and he wanted to drink it in. The city pulsed like a living creature. Rivers of people surged down the sidewalks, too busy to notice a kid slipping through.

An anthill in motion.

It reminded him of São Paulo—the rush, the noise, the press of legs and shoulders all blurring into motion. But New York lacked something. São Paulo had warmth, a human heat he hadn’t noticed until it was gone. Here, the air felt cold, like even the sunlight bounced off glass and steel instead of sticking.

A businessman barreled into him without a glance. Luke slipped sideways before he got flattened, lips twitching. Maybe he’d judged his old compatriots too harshly. At least they’d usually seen where they were going.

His next impression hit harder: the place was beautiful. Ugly-beautiful, like all big cities. Skyscrapers shouldering into the clouds and streets choked with cars. Chaotic charm he recognized instantly—but it carried its own strangeness. The buildings cut a different

silhouette than what he knew, the crowds were denser, the people colder. Even the pigeons seemed different, as if New York had groomed its vermin too.

The dissonance jarred him. Familiar and foreign, all at once.

Westport had never unsettled him like this. Even with all the culture shocks, it hadn't felt alien. Maybe because it was his first house, or maybe because, in the end, it had been home.

He suddenly understood the poet who wrote Canção do Exílio.

*The birds that sing here do not sing as they do there, indeed.*

New York had its charm, Luke decided. Interesting, even beautiful in its way. Not home—but a decent place to wander, maybe worth a visit now and then. And with Olympus floating somewhere above all this glass and concrete, exploration was basically guaranteed. Year-round campers got yearly excursions, if he remembered right.

"Look, little bird."

Dean's voice yanked him out of his thoughts. The goat-man jabbed a finger toward a skyscraper that dwarfed the rest, a steel-and-glass spear stabbing at the clouds. Luke tilted his head back until his neck ached. It looked less like architecture and more like a dare to the heavens—modern Babel, rebuilt in Manhattan.

"The Empire State Building," Dean declared, gently herding Luke along before he could get too caught staring. "That's the current location of Olympus. Well—one of them. Home of the gods. Or at least, some of them."

*One of them?* Luke wondered. He kept that one to himself. Out loud, he settled on, "Some?"

He squinted at the dizzying peak as if he might glimpse the hidden palace.

"Of course!" Dean huffed. "The gods are busy. The Flooder's got his palace under the sea. The Receiver of the Dead only drags himself here for the solstices. And some—like the Witch—you don't want around. Better for everyone that way."

Luke hummed, side-eyeing his guide. "I see… And the ones who do stick around—is it true that the Horai guard the gates?"

"Yes. During the winter solstice trips, we often catch sight of them." Dean's tone dipped, like he tasted something sour. "A friendly tip, little bird—avoid them if you ever travel up there. They're not fond of visitors."

*Interesting*.

"They guard the golden gates," Luke said airily, like he was commenting on the weather. "Makes sense they wouldn't love a parade of half-mortal kids trampling through their turf."

"Probably." Dean shrugged, but Luke didn't miss how his bushy brows pinched together for half a beat before smoothing. "You know a lot about the gods. More than most. Mortal parent

a teacher or something?"

"Nothing of the sort. I just like to read." Luke flicked the words out casually, no need to hand over the landmine that was his family—or just how much he actually knew. "Greek mythology's always been interesting."

"That's good. Very good." Dean nodded gravely, like Luke had passed some test. "But—" he wagged a finger, tone practiced "—don't call them myths or stories. The gods don't like that. Some take it… personally."

"I'll keep it in mind." Luke made a mental note to never upset anyone who could vaporize him with a sneeze. "So since you've actually been up there, what does it look like?"

Dean's brown eyes gleamed. "Like nothing in the mortal world. You've heard of the golden gates. But imagine Athens at its height—whole cities frozen perfect, streets paved in gold, palaces gleaming above seas of cloud. That's Olympus."

It sounded like a dream. But still.

"And the gods themselves?" Luke pressed. "Do they all live in palaces?"

"Yes. All deities are revered," the satyr said, half-distracted as he steered Luke down a quieter street. Even here, the needle of the Empire State Building cut the skyline, impossible to ignore. "Some more than others."

"What about the Moirai?"

Dean stopped dead. His shoes thumped against the pavement as he turned. Luke schooled his face into polite curiosity, but the weight of Dean's stare made it feel like standing under an x-ray.

"The daughters of Night are honored," Dean said finally, voice low. "On Olympus, in the Underworld. As is their right."

He didn't blink. For a second, Luke wondered if satyrs could read minds.

Then Dean's shoulders loosened, as if he'd found whatever answer he was searching for in Luke's eyes. "Listen, Luke. Curiosity's good. It'll keep you alive. But don't lose yourself chasing the Spinners. You'll crack your head open trying to make sense of destiny."

"I understand."

He didn't, not really—but Dean wouldn't budge, and pressing would only make him suspicious. And Luke could always find out more later.

"Good." Dean let out a relieved sigh, his shoulders slumping. "Let's get you to Camp. There's a rental company nearby that the Protectors keep close ties with."

Luke gave him a long, dubious look. "Do you even know how to drive?"

Dean looked like a scruffy teenager fresh off a bad all-nighter, all brown hair and messy clothes. Sure, he was older than that—satyrs aged weirdly, slower than humans—but Luke still doubted that made him any less of a road hazard.

Tree-hugging hippies, that's what satyrs were. Probably allergic to traffic laws.

"Of course I know!" Dean bristled. "We're trained to handle these metal monstrosities. How else do you think we ferry monster-magnets like you across the country if we can't even drive?"

Luke kept his face blank. "By braving the wilds. Isn't that your whole satyr thing?"

That did it. Dean's cheeks flushed red as he visibly fought to keep his composure.

Luke almost smirked.

"What wilds, little bird?" Dean snapped after sucking in a few steadying breaths. "New York is an urban jungle. And unless you want to test your odds out there on foot, a car is the best chance we've got of getting you to Camp alive."

"True," Luke conceded. "But what about monsters? Does the car actually conceal my scent, or…?"

Dean hesitated, scratching at his curls. "I was thinking more along the lines of… outrunning whatever shows up."

Luke exhaled, long and weary, like a tired adult dealing with a toddler. "Let's leave that as a last resort," he said, patting Dean's arm as if humoring him. "Tell me, would monsters sniff me out just by seeing me with you?"

"Not really. Satyrs slip into the mortal world all the time," Dean said, brows knitting as he studied Luke. Then, without warning, he leaned down and took an obnoxiously loud inhale right by Luke's ear.

Luke jerked back, hand half-raised to smack him, but Dean straightened with a baffled look. "Your scent seems… subtler. Maybe drowned out?"

He rubbed his chin like some scholar deep in thought.

Luke kept his voice even. "The streets of New York are crowded. Plenty of shoulders to rub even when you don't want to."

It was the trick that had kept him alive this long: smothering his demigod scent beneath a wash of humanity. Crowds worked best—thousands of ordinary lives piled on top of his own. In a pinch, even trash or cheap cologne did the job. It never lasted long, though.

Dean blinked at him, slow as a loading screen, before his jaw dropped.

"So that's how you kept disappearing! You were drowning your scent. That's—" His finger shot out, accusing and awed at the same time. "Genius. Absolute genius."

Without another word, Dean spun on his hooves and barreled ahead with renewed purpose.

Luke muttered something uncharitable under his breath and jogged after him, irritation nipping at his heels. Inwardly, though, his thoughts were darker. He prayed the stench of gasoline and motor oil would be thick enough to smother his scent, at least for the length of the trip. Long Island was still a ways off, and he dreaded the moment his smell clawed its way back to the surface, then they'd have to fall back on Dean's brilliant plan of "run really fast." And Luke knew exactly how that story ended: with some monster taking the opportunity to snuff out a half-blood son of Olympus.

He was about to suggest a quick pit stop at a pharmacy—or, failing that, a… discount on some cheap cologne—when Dean abruptly stopped.

They'd arrived.

The "rental office" was a squat, unimpressive building tucked off the road. Above the door hung a sun-faded sign that read CapriGo Rentals in peeling blue paint, complete with a cartoon goat sprinting heroically across the logo.

Luke stared at it for a beat.

Subtle. *Very* subtle.

A handful of cars sat lined in the lot, their hoods throwing back sharp flashes of summer light. Otherwise, the place was dead.

Only two satyrs loitered near the door, and their disguises were laughable. Baseball caps tugged low, but the horns still curved out like hooks for anyone paying attention. They looked older than Dean, gruffer, too.

He'd pictured New York crawling with Protectors, maybe even a few demigods milling about. Instead, just two washed-up goats keeping watch like mall cops.

Disappointment pricked. So much for meeting anyone like him.

Dean strode forward with all the confidence of a general and yanked Luke along by the arm, ignoring his glare. The interior was no better: one sagging sofa that smelled faintly of mildew, a dusty counter, and a single satyr manning it like the world's most jaded receptionist. Middle-aged, thick around the middle, eyes heavy-lidded.

"Good afternoon, senior Cliff. I request a vehicle to transport a demigod to Camp Half-Blood," Dean announced, voice stiff, his spine snapping straight like he was reporting for duty.

The older satyr raised one brow.

"Dean." His tone was flat, the name an entire critique in one syllable. His eyes flicked to Dean's grip on Luke's arm, the corner of his mouth tugging upward, amused.

Without ceremony, Cliff plucked a key off the wall and tossed it. Dean nearly fumbled the catch, scrambling to look competent. A clipboard came next, slapped down hard enough to rattle the counter. Names scrawled across the paper like graffiti.

“Do me a favor,” Cliff grunted, scratching his beard as Dean signed with stiff fingers. “Tell Brook it’s his turn to haul brats. I’ve been covering his shifts too long.”

Before Dean had even finished the last stroke of his name, Cliff yanked the clipboard back, already losing interest.

“I will not let you down, sir,” Dean said solemnly, shoulders snapping square like a cadet saluting his general. For a second Luke thought Dean might actually bow.

Cliff waved him off without looking, more bored clerk than a so-called Protector of the half-mortal spawn of the gods.

The second they stepped outside, Dean’s posture deflated. He twirled the key like a prize, swagger melting into something more casual. He pressed the fob every few steps, earning nothing but silence until—beep—a tired wheeze of a horn answered from across the lot.

Their ride looked like it had survived a war and lost. The wheels and undercarriage were caked with old dirt, and the paint was buried under layers of grime. Luke squinted, catching a faint hint of blue underneath, like the car still remembered what color it was supposed to be.

It wasn’t glamorous, but Luke supposed it would do.

Inside smelled faintly of mold and gasoline. Luke slid into the back, clicked his seatbelt immediately, and sat stiff as a board.

Dean had sworn he knew how to drive. Luke didn’t believe him for a second.

Still, when the engine rumbled to life and the car rolled forward without exploding or hitting a wall, Luke let out a breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding.

Maybe—*maybe*—the goat knew what he was doing after all.

Dean handled the wheel like he’d been born behind it, rolling out of the lot while the other satyrs opened the gates and waved them off like proud uncles sending a kid to school. No lurches, no sudden jerks, not even a sharp turn to keep Luke’s paranoia alive. It was… smooth.

The skyscrapers bled into smears of light and glass outside his window, yet inside Luke couldn’t even feel the speed.

“Ready to admit I can drive?” Dean asked, not bothering to hide the smug curve of his profile.

“I never said you couldn’t,” Luke shot back instantly, even as his muscles uncoiled, reluctant to admit the relief pumping through his veins.

Scratch that. A *lot* of relief.

“Of course you didn’t, little bird,” Dean huffed, amusement tucked in the corners of his voice.

The silence that followed wasn’t uncomfortable. Just the hum of the tires and the steady whistling of a satyr at the wheel. Skyscrapers gave way to forests, steel and glass dissolving into an endless sweep of green that clawed at the horizon.

Luke almost let himself get lost in the sweep of green—until he noticed the speck.

At first, his brain did him the favor of filing it under *animal*. A bird, maybe. Or a plane. But the longer he watched, the weirder it got: too organic for a plane, too big for any bird, too *wrong* for the woods.

His palms slicked with sweat. He wiped them on his jeans, hating himself for the tic.

“What do I smell like now, Dean?” he asked, voice tighter than he meant, like he already knew the answer.

Dean didn’t sugarcoat. His eyes flicked from the road to the horizon, then back. “Like the son of a major god. You’ve been for a while now.”

The speck wasn’t a speck anymore. It was a problem, and it was closing fast.

Dean slammed the accelerator. The sudden surge threw Luke against his seat, lungs punched empty as the engine roared like an angry beast. The sound swallowed everything—his heartbeat, Dean’s shouts, even his own muttered curse.

“Hold on, Luke! We’re close to Camp!” Dean’s voice cut through only in shards.

The car vibrated so hard it felt like it might shake itself to pieces. The world outside blurred into streaks of green and gold, except for the strawberry fields ahead, stretching out like salvation.

Luke could almost taste safety on his tongue. Camp Half-Blood. He could see rooftops now, pale Greek columns against the horizon. Relief surged, premature—

Something slammed against the roof. The entire car shuddered.

Claws punched through the ceiling. Metal peeled like wet paper.

Luke flinched as shadows flickered past his window, wing-shaped, blotting out the ground.

Dean cursed loud enough to make the air vibrate. He shoved the accelerator to the floor, and the car wailed in protest, engine screaming like it was about to blow. The satyr jerked the wheel left, then right, swerving hard enough to smash Luke against the door, but the thing on the roof held fast.

*If I were alone,* Luke thought bitterly, *this wouldn't have happened. Perfume. Nose-numbing perfume. I'd be invisible.*

A sharp *clack-clack-clack* cut the thought in half. Too close. He turned his head—and froze.

An eagle's head, big as the windshield, loomed at his window. Its beak gleamed. Its golden eye pinned him with unblinking hunger.

The griffin lunged.

Dean stomped the brake. The world snapped forward.

The griffin went spinning off the roof like a rag doll, wings thrashing uselessly.

Metal screamed. The car slammed into it—Luke caught the flash of claws, the crack of bone, then the sickening jolt as the bumper folded around flesh and feather. Tires shrieked against asphalt, the whole vehicle fishtailing sideways. For one awful breath Luke thought they'd wrap around the oak looming ahead.

They missed it by inches.

The world rattled back into stillness, the engine coughing smoke. Luke's head rang, vision swimming.

Dean was already on him, fumbling at his seatbelt with frantic hands.

"Out. Now!"

Luke stumbled after him, heart still jackhammering. The griffin's shadow passed overhead again as they bolted uphill, sprinting for the only safety left in sight.

A shriek tore the air in half. Hope cracked with it.

Luke risked a glance back.

The griffin was charging, its wings bent at jagged angles from the crash, feathers broken and bloodied. The injuries slowed it but didn't make it less terrifying—it was still as massive as a car, with a beak shaped for tearing and claws that could carve through steel.

Nothing like the harpy. This wasn't a fight he could win.

"Keep running!" Dean bellowed, skidding to a stop. He planted himself squarely in the griffin's path, hands clenched, jaw set. "It wants you, not me! I'll hold it—go!"

For a heartbeat Luke just stared. Dean, stubborn, ridiculous Dean, standing alone against that nightmare—he was the bravest person Luke had ever met in either life.

Fear snapped him forward. He obeyed, legs pumping, sprinting until the air grew different.

The *boundary*.

Then Dean's cry split the hill.

Luke froze.

The griffin had him pinned beneath one massive paw, its weight crushing, its hooked beak lowering toward Dean's throat. One golden eye slid sideways, staring at its prey with cold, deliberate malice.

*No. He's not dying because of me.*

Luke's hands shook as he tore open his pack and drew the short bronze sword. The metal caught the last smear of daylight, flashing like a signal.

The griffin's head snapped toward him instantly.

Dean tumbled free as the monster shifted, abandoning its prey. The great bird-cat thing fixed Luke with its burning eye, muscles bunching, every feather bristling.

And then it came for him.

Luke froze, sword trembling in his grip, eyes locked on the monster as his mind tore through plans faster than he could blink. He couldn't kill it—he didn't need to. All he had to do was survive long enough to drag Dean through.

He edged his blade to the side. The griffin's head tracked the movement, eyes burning, muscles bunching for the strike.

*Now*.

"Move, Dean! Here, fast!" Luke screamed, raising his sword high. The gleam caught the beast's attention, and it dove.

Luke threw himself aside. Talons sliced the air where he'd stood, and then—*wham*—the creature slammed into something unseen. Its shriek warbled, confused, as claws scraped uselessly against the invisible wall.

The barrier.

Dean didn't hesitate. He kicked free of his human shoes, hooves flashing, and bolted. In a blur he crossed the hill, safe behind the magic.

Luke staggered back. The griffin lunged again. Instinct made him squeeze his eyes shut—waiting for pain that never came.

When he dared to peek, the beast's paw was a hair from his face, pressed flat against the unseen shield. Its eyes blazed with hatred as it battered the wall, the sound like a drum in Luke's skull.

Relief crashed over him, leaving him weak and trembling. The griffin roared, one last furious scream, before retreating.

Beside him, Dean eased down, chest heaving, goat legs bare. He gave Luke a crooked smile.

“Welcome to Camp Half-Blood, little bird.”

Chapter End Notes

A fun fact — Canção do Exílio (Song of Exile) is such an important piece of literature that some of its verses appear in the Brazilian national anthem.

I tried to worldbuild a little in this chapter, incorporating the “do not say the gods’ name in public” thing. So I ended up researching a lot of epithets for a bunch of random gods and it culminated into discovering that one of Hermes’ titles is Giver of Joy.
A minute of silence for this discovery.

Anyways, this entire chapter felt like this:
Luke: “what a funny little guy, want to be friends?”
Dean: praying to the gods for patience

# Chapter 4: Childhood - Camp Half-Blood

Chapter Notes

Edited

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Luke trudged toward what had to be the Big House, Dean's hand heavy on his shoulder.

The farmhouse loomed at the top of the rise, its sky-blue paint sun-bleached and peeling, the kind of place that belonged to some eighteenth-century land baron, not a summer camp full of Greek monsters and demigods. A wide deck wrapped around it, cluttered with lawn chairs and tables. It looked less like a haunted house, more like the kind of porch where old men wasted away summer afternoons.

And sure enough, two men sat at one of the tables, cards fanned in their hands. The light of late afternoon caught on them just so, like something out of a painting. Picturesque, even. But Luke knew better. Neither man was remotely human, and that knowledge made the scene feel unsettling, not quaint.

His fingers twitched against his backpack straps as he reached the bottom of the stairs. Dean's grip on his shoulder tightened, steering him forward. The satyr's posture had gone stiff, so stiff he might as well have had a metal rod instead of a spine. Luke, in contrast, seemed to shrink inward, like he could fold himself small enough not to be noticed.

"Good afternoon, Mr. D. Good afternoon, Chiron," Dean said, his voice formal, rehearsed, the same tone he'd used at CapriGo Rentals.

Luke felt a sharp poke in the ribs. He forced out a quiet, "Good afternoon."

The man in the wheelchair glanced up, his smile warm and disarming. The other didn't bother looking at them, eyes fixed on his cards, as though the entire world could burn and he wouldn't lift his head.

Luke studied them from under his lashes, curiosity battling discomfort. It wasn't every day you came face to face with people you'd read from a book—especially from a past life, no less.

Chiron looked like a professor, the type who wore a threadbare tweed jacket and smiled while handing back a test that covered topics no one had studied. Thinning brown hair, a scruffy beard, and the calm air of someone who'd seen too many panicked students.

Mr. D, on the other hand, could've been mistaken for a mean uncle forced into sobriety. His cheeks were flushed, his eyes bloodshot, his nose red from either drink or temper—or both.

Curly black hair, so dark it caught purple in the light, crowned his head. He reeked of grapes. The gaudy leopard-print Hawaiian shirt did nothing to help.

He was also losing. Badly.

“It seems I win this round, Mr. D,” Chiron said mildly, laying his cards down calmly.

“Bah! These brats broke my concentration.” Mr. D scowled, words as sour as vinegar.

With a flick of his wrist, the air warped—bent, folded, and rippled like water. Luke blinked, trying to follow it, but the logic broke apart in his head. Then, just like that, a Diet Coke appeared in Mr. D’s hand. He cracked it open and sipped, grimacing as if the mortal drink offended him more than losing ever could.

“I’m sure the children didn’t mean to,” Chiron said warmly, hands folded in the lap of what Luke knew was a fake pair of legs. They looked so natural that for a second he doubted himself.

Mr. D scoffed, barely sparing them a glance. His eyes slid past with the dull apathy of someone forced to babysit charges he had no love for. Then, abruptly, they snapped back.

The second look pinned Luke. The indifference drained away, replaced by a purplish flame dancing in those bloodshot eyes. It grew wilder as it studied him, and Luke’s stomach knotted.

Suddenly, all those half-remembered myths of Dionysus swarmed up uninvited: frenzied maenads shrieking in the woods, tearing men apart under the god’s intoxicating spell.

“It seems one of my brothers procreated yet again,” Mr. D drawled at last, reclining deeper in his chair.

He sipped his Diet Coke like it was wine, eyes still locked on Luke. The flames guttered and shrank, their weight easing, but not gone. Luke let out a breath he hadn’t realized he was holding.

“This young man has just arrived, Mr. D,” Chiron cut in gently. “Perhaps introductions should come before revelations.”

Mr. D didn’t break eye contact. “What do the youngsters say these days, Dean? Whatever?”

He gave the can a lazy swirl, wrist moving in slow, practiced circles.

“Yes, Mr. D,” Dean answered, cowed.

“*Whatever*, Chiron.”

Chiron’s smile never faltered.

“*Fine* then. Welcome to Camp Half-Blood, kid.” Mr. D gave a dramatic sigh, waving his can as if the act of speaking drained him. “I’m the director of this miserable daycare for god-

spawn. Call me Mr. D, or 'sir' if you absolutely must pester me."

The words slouched out lazily, but his eyes said otherwise. They sharpened, lingering on Luke as though weighing and measuring something he didn't like.

"I'm Chiron, the activities director," the man in the wheelchair followed, his voice warm. "I know you must be confused and afraid, child, but all will be explained soon enough."

He smiled kindly, as though trying to soften the god's sharp edges.

Luke glanced at Dean, who gave him a subtle nod—*go on*. Swallowing, Luke forced out, "Pleased to meet you, sirs. I'm Luke Castellan."

The effect was instant.

Both men flinched. Barely a twitch—but Luke saw it. A blink later, they were composed again, trading the kind of look adults use when they don't want the kids to notice.

But Luke noticed.

His name clanged around the space like a dropped coin. Was it because of his mom? She'd tried to become the new Oracle, back when he was a baby. He remembered—in fuzzy, fragmented flashes—his father's arms, then screaming, then being passed away to someone else. A figure in a wheelchair waiting that could only be Chiron had been there too.

*But what about Mr. D?*

The memories slipped through his fingers. Dionysus's stare pressed on him him, narrow-eyed, something purple flickering in the depths. Luke bit his lip and dropped his gaze. Even Chiron's kinder scrutiny weighted down on him like a spotlight.

"Excuse me, sirs." Dean's voice cut clean through the silence. "I must inform you that a griffin followed us to Camp. It intercepted our car and damaged it in the process, but in doing so, its wings were broken. I believe it's still somewhere along the perimeter, and if I may be so bold, I think it's crucial to the campers' safety that someone be sent to deal with it swiftly."

Both adults blinked, as if surfacing from a spell.

Luke let out a breath he hadn't realized he was holding. Once again, Dean proved why he deserved respect: deferential to authority, sure, but he knew when to shove himself between a demigod and the abyss.

"A griffin, this close?" Chiron murmured, stroking his beard with worry.

"Let the Ares brats deal with it," Mr. D said without hesitation, sipping his Diet Coke. "Those hooligans would jump off a cliff for the chance."

Chiron tilted his head, weighing it. "Perhaps with some of Apollo's children for ranged support?"

Mr. D tapped the table lazily. “And toss in one of Athena’s brain-spawn. Killing a giant, flightless chicken shouldn’t need much strategy, but better be safe than sorry.”

“Very well,” Chiron said smoothly. “I’ll announce the mission at tonight’s singalong.”

Mr. D flicked his hand, already bored.

“Dean, would you stay here and give your report to Mr. D? Our young friend must watch the Orientation Film before dinner,” Chiron instructed, starting to maneuver his wheelchair toward the house.

Before Luke even thought about it, his hand shot out, fisting Dean’s shirt in a death grip. His fingers went white against the fabric. He didn’t know Chiron. He knew Dean—Dean who had nearly died for him, who he had nearly died for in turn. The idea of being separated now, when he felt so vulnerable, made his skin prickle with anxiety.

“Reports at this hour?” Mr. D groused, one eyebrow arched, disdain dripping from each word. “Just let Dean take the kid. I’ve had enough.”

He took a long, deliberate sip of his Diet Coke, eyes fixed on anything but Luke.

Luke’s grip eased before his brain caught up, relief washing over him like a humiliating, surprise rain shower. He risked a glance at the god: Dionysus looked utterly uninterested.

“Perhaps it’s for the best,” Chiron mused, his eyes flicking down to Luke’s hand still clutching Dean's shirt with a glimmer of concern. He and Mr. D shared a look before Chiron added, "The film is in the office. When it’s finished, please go to the Dining Pavilion, you’ve arrived just in time for dinner."

“Understood, sir.” Dean gave a crisp nod, then softened when he looked back at Luke. His smile was small, but it was enough to anchor him.

Even so, Luke trailed at Dean’s side like a duckling when the satyr moved, his fist still knotted in the older boy’s shirt.

Heat flushed under his skin—*humiliation*—but he was too rattled to care. Logically, he knew he was safe here. And yet nothing about this place felt familiar. The griffin that had nearly gutted him was still out there, somewhere beyond the trees, close enough to this so-called demigod sanctuary that they would send demigods to deal with it. Any second now, he half-expected it to burst through the wall and finish the job.

And then there was the god.

That flash behind Mr. D’s eyes—power coiled into a bottomless pit of lunacy. An abyss that had stared right back at him.

The memory left him shivering.

Luke tried to distract himself by scanning the farmhouse. For something so old, it was surprisingly tidy. Most of the furniture was adorned with big-cat motifs—probably a nod to

Mr. D's sacred animals. Here and there, modern touches peeked through: a massive television sat in the living room, and a phone was tucked discreetly into a corner Luke nearly overlooked. The technology threw him off. Weren't demigods supposed to avoid that stuff? Didn't it attract monsters or something?

Lost in thought, Luke walked straight into Dean's back when the satyr stopped dead. Pain shot up his nose. He let go of Dean's shirt, rubbing his face and glaring daggers at the back of his Protector's head.

Dean, as if sensing exactly what was about to come out of Luke's mouth, hurried to push open the next door, revealing a very, *very* interesting room.

Chiron had called it an office. Luke had his doubts.

What greeted him looked more like the aftermath of three different bad ideas mashed together. One wall showed off convention shirts—Party Ponies merch riddled with bullet holes, suspicious stains, and scorch marks that didn't exactly scream "professionalism." The other walls were plastered with hundreds of photos, demigods from every decade. Some faces Luke even recognized from magazines or TV.

In the corner sat a desk cluttered with a computer and a cassette player. Technology, again. Beside it, a projector pointed at the only bare wall, its surface gleaming bronze, with a few plastic chairs lined up like this was some kind of demigod initiation auditorium.

Workspace? Collector's room? Lecture hall? Luke decided *mess* was more accurate.

He didn't get to dwell long. Dean's grinning face popped into view.

Luke already dreaded what was about to come out of his mouth.

"You know, little bird," Dean said, voice dripping with smugness, "all those days maniacally running after you were worth it. Just for this moment." He paused, eyes glittering. "You've imprinted on me."

Luke's scowl was immediate. "I did no such thing."

But the flush burning at the tips of his ears ruined the effect.

"Your little hands gripping my shirt said otherwise," Dean teased, a smile tugging at his mouth.

Luke refused to dignify that with words. Instead, he crossed his arms with a loud huff, eyes narrowing. The goat tried to smother a snort in a fake cough, but the sparkle of amusement in his eyes gave him away.

"Don't I have a movie to watch?" Luke muttered, voice a little too hushed, eager to flee the topic.

"Yeah, yeah." Dean straightened, smugly satisfied. Pointing toward the line of plastic chairs, he added, "Just sit there while I find it."

Luke shot him a suspicious squint for good measure before obeying.

The chair was as unforgiving as it looked, digging into his back as he shifted, searching for a less miserable position. Behind him, Dean rummaged through something, then let out a triumphant *"Ha!"* Moments later, the bronze wall flickered to life with the scratchy glow of the projector.

Luke tilted his head as the opening credits began to roll. Apparently, the Orientation Film was made by Apollo. *Only* Apollo.

"Be warned," Dean said, his voice suddenly hesitant, "this film is… an experience."

That only made Luke lean back, shooting the satyr a sideways glance. How bad could it be? Apollo was the god of music, poetry, light—art itself. Surely the Bright One couldn't produce anything dull. If, against all odds, the film was lackluster, it'd be incoherent at best. Shameful at worst.

The opening seconds crushed his optimism.

The "educational Orientation Film" was not an orientation film at all.

It was a variety show.

From the *fifties*.

Luke suffered through every act in mortified astonishment, cringing on behalf of every demigod and satyr ever bullied into singing, dancing, or worse—slapstick comedy routines. Naturally, Apollo hogged the spotlight, strutting in a dangerously short chiton one moment, belting a stupidly catchy a cappella song the next.

Yes, the skits technically touched on Camp Half-Blood's basics, but accuracy was… generous. And considering the film was at least forty years old, even generous felt like a lie.

When the credits finally sputtered out, Luke just sat there, stunned into silence.

The movie was less an orientation film and more a shrine to Apollo's ego—artistic value, maybe, if you squinted—but as anyone's first impression of Camp?

Disastrous.

Luke slowly turned in his chair, meeting Dean's equally haunted stare. He gestured at the blank wall.

"I told you," the satyr said flatly. Then, after switching off the projector, repeated for good measure, "I told you."

"Yes, you did." Luke pushed himself to his feet, grimacing. "I just didn't think it'd be this… cringeworthy."

“That’s what they all say.” Dean slid the tape back into its case, then gave Luke a once-over. Satisfied, he added, “You look better now. Less like you’re about to bolt.”

Momentarily taken aback, Luke stared at Dean in silence. The satyr turned his back and busied himself at Chiron’s desk, giving Luke space to collect himself.

“Almost dying has that effect,” Luke said at last. They both knew it wasn’t the full truth, but Dean had the decency to pretend otherwise.

“That’s very true,” Dean replied evenly, his expression mild enough to hide what he really thought. Then, with a flash of mischief, he added, “Come on, little bird. You were basking in that cinematic masterpiece long enough. If we don’t move, we’ll miss dinner.”

Luke snorted at his silliness—and in that small, unguarded moment decided, yes, they were friends now.

He followed Dean out. The Big House was quiet, the two directors already gone. A glance out the window explained why: night had fallen, and Artemis’s chariot gleamed high across the sky. Dinner was probably starting without them.

As they walked, Dean pointed out landmarks, but Luke barely heard him. His attention kept snagging on the world itself. Marble columns half-buried in grass, torches flickering against the wood and stone cabins, the whole place like someone had torn classical Greece out of time and dropped it here. Which, he figured, wasn’t far from the truth.

Camp Half-Blood was *old*.

“…and these are the cabins. You probably already know this, but it doesn’t hurt to say it again: all twelve Olympians have cabins, even the ones without kids. It’s an honor thing,” Dean chattered.

Some stragglers on their way to dinner glanced at them, curious, but Luke ignored them. His eyes had locked onto Cabin Eleven.

His father’s cabin.

*What a dump.* The place sagged under chipped brown paint, patches flaking like dead skin. The wood was half-rotted, and Luke wondered, if he stepped onto the porch, would it even hold his weight? He was pretty light, but… the way the stairs bent didn’t inspire confidence. That thing didn’t look trustworthy.

The only part still whole was the caduceus nailed above the door—of course. Hermes couldn’t be dishonored with a sloppy replica of his famous staff. The rest of the building? Clearly beneath his notice.

Luke’s stomach sank.

“And here we are,” Dean said, ushering him toward an open space framed by columns. “Looks like we’re just in time.”

The dining pavilion buzzed with noise, torches blazing against marble and wood. Luke slipped past a nymph juggling an armful of fruit, relieved to see the campers still mingling. The offerings hadn't started yet, thankfully. It would have been nerve-wracking to present his own with everyone already done, all eyes on him.

"Come on, this way."

Dean cut straight toward the Hermes table. Luke sighed inwardly, like an old man with back problems eyeing a flight of stairs. The table was crammed shoulder to shoulder, a can of sardines in human form.

He sighed again, this time for his future. It wasn't looking bright.

"Hey, Aubrey!" Dean called to a black-haired girl perched on the edge of the Hermes table.

She turned, blue eyes sharp as shards of ice, and extremely irritated. Luke froze. He knew those eyes, they were the same shade he saw in the mirror every day.

His sister—no question.

Her expression shifted the moment she saw him, the glare easing into something warmer as she studied him, head tilted. She crooked a finger, beckoning him closer.

"This is Aubrey Gaumond, Cabin Eleven's counselor," Dean said, giving Luke a little shove forward. "Since you're unclaimed, she'll be in charge of you."

"Come on, kid. Sit." Aubrey shoved the boy next to her so hard the whole table shifted, a chorus of groans rising as she carved out space.

"Aubrey, his name's Luke Castellan. Just arrived. Don't overwhelm him," Dean warned, his gaze going steely.

"Obviously, satyr." She shot the look right back, then flicked her chin at the Dionysus table. "Now, are you gonna keep blocking nymphs, or move along?"

Dean clicked his tongue, glaring a moment longer before turning his back on her.

"If you need anything, I'll be right there," he told Luke, voice deliberately calm. "Just wave."

Luke nodded, still trying to process, watching Dean stalk off toward the satyr table. Then he squeezed into the narrow space Aubrey had cleared, shoulder-to-shoulder with her.

"Ridiculous." Aubrey scoffed, piling meat, bread, and fruit onto a plate before shoving it in front of Luke. "He's always like that. You'd think I don't know how to take care of my own campers the way he hovers."

"Maybe he's just worried," Luke offered, careful.

"If only." Aubrey sighed, the fight draining from her voice now that Dean was gone. She jabbed her fork at him. "Don't touch it yet, little Luke. First, Mr. D drones at us, then we feed

the gods."

Before Luke could ask, Chiron struck the ground with his hooves. The sound cracked across the pavilion, silencing the chatter. Luke stared. He'd known Chiron was a centaur, but knowing it and *seeing* a full horse body unfold from a wheelchair were two very different things.

Then Mr. D heaved himself upright, radiating the energy of a man late to his own nap.

"I suppose I must warn you brats that we have a new camper today. Lucy Castillo."

Immediately, Chiron muttered something.

"Ah. Luke Castellan." Mr. D waved the correction off like it wasn't worth his time. "Congratulations, huzzah, et cetera. Now, go toss your food in the fire."

Polite applause rose. Then the campers gathered around the central campfire, each offering the best portions from their plates. Some laid down fruit, others chunks of cheese, while one girl slipped a particularly juicy piece of meat into the flames.

"It might seem dumb," Aubrey said, low, nudging him toward the fire, "but the gods like the smell. So we give them the best to avoid offense."

Luke swallowed, clutching the plate, and followed her into the press of campers, the firelight painting everyone in gold.

Aubrey stepped up first. She didn't bother with ceremony, flicking a handful of bright, ripe strawberries into the fire with a casual twist of her wrist. The flames hissed, and under her breath Luke caught the name: *Hermes*.

Then it was his turn. For a moment, he stood frozen, the plate heavy in his hands. He could have offered to no one. He *seriously* considered it. But he lived in Hermes' cabin now, and—for his eternal displeasure—Hermes was his father.

Jaw tight, Luke chose the thickest piece of beef and shoved it into the flames.

The smoke curled up.

One breath carried him back to beaches with his first family, salt air and fried crab legs on paper plates. Another swept him into his mother's kitchen, sweet, thick with the smell of cookies and cakes still warm from the oven.

His throat closed, eyes stinging, but he forced the name out anyway.

"Hermes."

A ripple of gasps echoed through the pavilion. Luke blinked, startled, until he realized no one was looking at him. They were staring *above* him.

He tilted his head back. A glowing caduceus spun lazily above him, its silver light flaring brighter the moment he looked at it, almost joyful.

“It is determined,” Chiron’s voice carried, solemn.

Around him, campers dropped to their knees, plates clattering to the dirt. Even Aubrey, though she shot him a quick glance with a pleased glint in her eye, bent her head in deference.

“Hermes,” Chiron proclaimed. “Giver of Joy. Bringer of Luck. Master of Wiles. Hail, Luke Castellan, son of the Immortal Guide.”

*What perfect timing you have, Dad. Seriously.*

Chapter End Notes

Luke is finally inside camp. I really tried to capture his anxiety at being in a new place after days of being a feral child in the streets. Don’t know if it worked all that well.

Dean here is proving to everyone why he is the best boy yet again. But he got a sudden rival for a custody battle - Luke’s sister, the only and one Aubrey.

We don’t even put Hermes in the running.

Well, people. The Apollo part is canon. He really did a variety show for the Orientation Film. I can only wonder what was Chiron’s reaction to that, but, alas, one cannot offend the gods. Outwardly. One can’t offend outwardly. If not Luke would be in trouble for thinking “you’re a disgrace to your kind, your family, and your own very existence.”

When I wrote this, I had this vision of Hermes running around like a headless chicken trying to find his missing kid after, you know, realizing he is not with his crazy mom, and that’s why he claimed Luke so quickly. The first sight of his son and he’s at camp??? Best to claim him now, never you mind about the other kids waiting for such claiming for years and years.

Tell me your thoughts! I really enjoy reading what you guys think!

# Chapter 5: Childhood - Activities

Chapter Notes

Edited

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The cabin was a madhouse. Voices crashed over each other, the shrill screams rising higher, until Luke's ears throbbed. It wasn't stopping—wouldn't stop—and any second now, someone was definitely going to throw a punch.

"Order!" Aubrey's voice cracked like a whip. She stomped her foot hard enough to rattle the floorboards, then clamped a hand on Luke's head and mussed his hair side to side. "Do not scare the newbie!"

"It's *because* of the newbie!" a curly-haired girl snapped.

"Yeah," a cranky brown-haired boy added. "Couldn't he have waited to be claimed in the morning? Now we're stuck picking who gives up a bed right before lights-out!"

Luke let the complaints wash over him. He understood. Honestly, he'd be mad too. He'd been claimed on day one—barely an hour after Mr. D's sarcastic welcome—while plenty of these kids were still sleeping on the floor, waiting for some god to remember they existed. And now, thanks to Hermes' actual kid showing up, one of them got bumped right back to the ground like a stray mutt.

Not that Luke had any interest in joining them. The floor didn't look comfortable.

"You know the rules, Katherine. Levi." Aubrey's tone cut across the room, firm, but not without sympathy. "Every child of the Messenger gets a bed. Don't make me choose which one of you gives it up."

"It can't be me." Katherine clutched her pillow like it was a lifeline, her eyes fixed on the floor with open disgust. "To sleep on the filthy ground, where everyone stomps around with their dirty shoes… I can't. I simply can't."

*Does she have a phobia or something?* Luke wondered, noticing how the dark-skinned girl never let her bare feet touch the floor.

"It isn't fair!" Levi burst out, and several unclaimed voices rose in agreement. "We all slept on the ground at some point. Why does the new kid get a bed right away just because of who his father is?"

The room fell still.

The children of Hermes, lounging on their beds, all turned their glares on Levi at once.

“Watch your words, Levi,” Aubrey said darkly. “I’m sure you meant no disrespect to me, my siblings, or—” her voice dipped “—our divine father.”

Levi’s eyes went wide. He realized too late just how close he’d come to cursing the hand that fed him.

“I-I just meant—” he stammered.

“We all understood you perfectly well.” Aubrey cut him off. Her gaze swept the room, twitchy, like she half-expected Hermes himself to materialize in the middle of the cabin and smite them for one idiot’s lack of tact.

And then—

“I will sleep on the ground.” The impassive male voice dropped into the silence like a stone.

Everyone turned as a tall teenager uncoiled from his sheets, moving with the languid grace of someone who couldn’t care less. He looked Aubrey’s age, maybe older, skin so pale it made Luke’s look sun-tanned. Platinum hair fell into sharp, icy eyes that could freeze a room.

“Are you sure, Axel? As one of the older campers, you have the right to keep your bed,” Aubrey said—an empty courtesy. She didn’t wait for his answer before steering Luke toward him.

“I am. The noise is annoying,” Axel muttered, sliding to the floor beside his mattress. He shut his eyes immediately, not even bothering with a blanket.

“Well. Crisis averted,” Aubrey announced, her tone cutting through the tension. She shot a glare at one brother who looked ready to mess with the sleeping teenager. “Follow Axel’s example and sleep.”

Luke crept past the cabin’s unlikely savior and sank onto the vacated bed. He clutched his worn backpack to his chest, guilt prickling even as the mattress welcomed his aching body. Axel had traded comfort for him, but still, Luke sighed in relief as his back met the mattress, his muscles slowly unclenching from the day. From the bag, he pulled out a battered photograph and let his eyes drink it in.

*I did it, Mom,* he thought drowsily, pressing the picture to his chest. *I made it to Camp Half-Blood.*

When he next opened his eyes, sunlight poured through the windows. Squinting, Luke spotted his sister planted in the middle of the room like a drill sergeant.

“Wake up, Cabin Eleven!” Aubrey bellowed, her voice closer to a nightmare rooster than a seventeen-year-old girl.

The room erupted. Campers flinched, blankets flew, and one poor kid toppled clean out of his bunk. Only Axel moved with some dignity. He rose with glacial slowness, his face as

unreadable as it had been the night before. Then again, considering how he'd slipped into sleep without so much as a yawn, Luke had already decided not to trust the guy's expressions —if you could even call them that—to reveal anything about what was going on in his head.

"Come on, people! Do you want to miss breakfast?" Aubrey barked.

Campers scrambled, trading blankets for fresh shirts. Aubrey shoved the boys to one side and corralled the girls to the other, yanking a curtain across the middle. Somehow, that made the place feel even smaller, but nobody complained. They were used to it.

Luke wasn't. He stayed frozen on his bunk, acutely aware of the shirt sticking to his skin and the lack of anything else to wear.

"Tiny bird."

The voice was flat, but Luke still jolted. Axel was watching him, eyes unreadable, like a statue deciding whether to blink.

"Why aren't you changing?"

The question slipped out of Luke's mouth before he could stop it. "Why does everyone keep calling me a bird?"

Axel actually thought about it—for a few long, slow seconds—and then gave a decisive nod.

"You're cute."

Silence stretched. Axel stared. Luke, weirded out but stubborn, stared back.

An amused voice cut through. "It's obvious he doesn't have anything else to wear, oh great savior."

Axel's gaze slid, unbothered, to the olive-skinned teen Aubrey had shooed away last night.

"And you, littlest brother," the teen added, smirking at Luke, "just look at that shirt. Besides, the nickname fits a kid of the Messenger."

"I understand," Axel said at last. Then, as if that settled everything, he rose and walked off without so much as a goodbye.

Luke blinked after him.

"Don't mind him." The teen stepped in smoothly. "I'm Jack. Jack Cortez." He guided Luke toward a bunk with easy confidence, already rummaging through his stuff. A moment later he pulled out an old orange Camp shirt and held it out. "Here. Bit big, but it'll do until you get your own."

Luke accepted it with a quiet, genuine thanks. The fabric was soft from too many washes, the sleeves hanging well past his elbows. Oversized, yes, but he preferred it that way

For the first time, he glanced shyly at Jack and thought maybe—*maybe*—life here wouldn't be so unbearable.

"ELEVEN! Assemble!"

Aubrey's bark shattered the moment. She ripped the curtain aside, leading a column of girls who marched out behind her. The rest of the cabin fell in like soldiers.

Luke trudged at the very back, cut off from the cluster of siblings up front. "Rank by age," apparently. A joke, obviously. He'd seen two of his brothers slinking behind the notably older Axel like courtiers trailing a king. Still, Levi's sharp elbow and poisonous glare kept him stuck in place.

Luke burned holes into the back of the little savage's skull. One day, he swore, the brat would learn.

By the time he surfaced from his plotting, they'd already filed into the Dining Pavilion. The marble columns and crowded tables seemed to appear out of nowhere, like the whole place had been magicked into existence, buzzing with voices and the clatter of dishes. Luke snapped his head up, eyes scanning the crowd, searching for Dean's horned head.

Nothing. Just more strangers.

A lump slid down his throat as Aubrey pressed a plate into his hands. He swallowed his disappointment along with the food.

"What has you looking so down, little brother?"

Warmth prickled his chest at the phrase—his first time having a sister who seemed to actually like him. But her sharp eyes didn't miss the sulk clinging to his face.

Her gaze followed his, landing on Dionysus' table. A flicker of understanding crossed her features. And aggravation.

"Ah. The goat."

Her chair scraped loudly as she stood. A dangerous glint in her eye, Aubrey seized the first unlucky satyr that walked by and yanked him into an interrogation.

Luke ducked his head and quietly finished breakfast alone, suddenly aware of how heavy the stares felt without her beside him. It wasn't just the unclaimed glaring at the new arrival; other cabins too.

Curious. Others appraising. Some flat-out hostile.

Hermes had done Luke no favors by claiming him so fast. Uncharitably, he wondered where that sudden interest had been when his mother hit the floor mid-fit, begging for a man who'd walked out long ago.

A heavy sigh snapped him back.

Aubrey dropped onto the bench beside him, and just like that, the stares scattered, like a herd of sheep going still, hoping the wolf wouldn't notice them.

"They don't know anything," she said, tight with frustration. "But don't worry. By day's end he'll show, and if he doesn't…" Her voice dipped, too low for him to catch. A shake of her head. She forced her tone lighter. "Anyway, let's focus on what matters. Today's your first day joining the activities. Over the next few days, we'll be assessing your skills, seeing where you stand. Then we'll put together your training plan, with Chiron's input, of course."

It made sense, mostly. But one part snagged on something in Luke's brain.

"We?"

"Me and Axel. The guy who gave you his bed."

Luke made a face.

"He might be… peculiar," Aubrey admitted, a twinkle of amusement breaking through her firm tone. "But he knows his stuff."

"If you say so," Luke muttered, unconvinced.

Her hand shot out to ruffle his hair, ignoring his glare.

Then she stood, motioning to the others. As one, the entire Hermes table scraped back their benches and fell into line behind her.

This time, Luke stuck to Aubrey's side like glue, tossing Levi a smug look. The other boy's face curdled like he'd bitten a lemon.

Good.

He let himself drift on the chatter around him. Older campers from Cabins Five, Six, and Seven had been sent after the griffin that mauled the car yesterday. Even the girl in charge of cabin inspections was on the team, which earned a collective sigh of relief from everyone.

That surprised him. When Chiron and Mr. D were talking, Luke figured it'd be days before they actually dis something.

Apparently not.

He hoped everyone came back okay.

Aubrey's voice yanked him out of the thought. They'd arrived at a broad training field beside the woods. Brightly painted targets lined one stretch, golden-haired kids loosing arrows with infuriating ease while Chiron corrected their form. Off to the right, a circular arena cluttered with stray weapons racks, where Ares brats were happily trying to pound each other into the dirt.

"Little Luke, here." Aubrey pressed a bow into his hands.

It felt awkward. He tried to nock an arrow, but it flopped to the ground like a bird that didn't know how to fly. Face red, he shot a glance at Aubrey, who was clearly biting back a smile.

"Like this. Come on, I'll teach you."

She nudged his feet apart, tapped his spine straight, moved him into position. Then, without breaking a sweat, she nocked an arrow and hit it dead center. Luke tried to mimic her, but his arrow flopped at his feet like a wounded bird. The laughter came fast, Levi's voice loudest of them all, making his ears burn.

Luke clenched his jaw. He wanted to melt into the dirt.

Aubrey's glare cut across the range like a guillotine, silencing the snickers. All but Levi. Still sore from last night, he couldn't resist.

"Nice shot, newbie! If the targets were on the ground, you'd be the next Robin Hood!"

"You—"

Aubrey's snarl snapped every head their way. Even Chiron abandoned his flock of golden-haired prodigies and trotted over, frowning.

"What seems to be the matter, Aubrey?"

"Nothing, sir. Just a few campers confused about whether this is training or a comedy show." Her teeth barely moved as she speared Levi with her eyes.

"I see." Chiron glanced pointedly at the boy. "While I appreciate your enthusiasm, children, it's far more useful to channel that energy into improving your skills."

That was all it took.

Silence settled again, broken only by the twang of bowstrings and the thud of arrows. Luke returned to practice too, this time with Chiron nearby, offering advice and keeping an eye on this side of the field, trusting that Cabin Seven could manage on their own for now.

"Try this, Luke."

"Elbow a little higher."

"Very good shot. I'm sure you can do it again."

Slowly, Luke found himself improving. His shots grew more consistent, until at last, the arrows were landing somewhere inside the target with some regularity.

Progress, technically.

When the lesson ended, Aubrey steered them toward the sparring grounds.

Luke picked a sword from the rack, the weight settling into his hand like it belonged there. He turned—and nearly jumped out of his skin.

Axel stood a step away, silent as a shadow, those washed-out eyes boring into him. For someone that tall, he moved like he were part spirit—just *appearing* out of nowhere.

*Does he haunt people too?* Luke wondered, shooting him a side-eye as he recovered enough to shuffle aside and let the man pick out his own sword.

Axel moved like he had all the time in the world, or like someone still half-dreaming. And as… interesting as it was to watch him weigh the swords, Luke forced himself to look past him.

His eyes locked on the man in the center of the arena, muscular and broad-shouldered, barking orders with a scowl that seemed to be permanently etched onto his face. If Luke had to guess, his divine parent's name started with *A* and ended with *res*.

"Cabin Eleven. No trickery." The instructor's voice rose above the noise, his eyes narrowing at Luke's two snickering brothers like they'd already been caught red-handed once.

Luke really didn't want to know the story behind that.

"In any case, drill time! Show me what you losers have been doing. I'm sure it's the same disappointing shit as always, but maybe—*maybe*—you can improve just marginally enough to actually survive," the instructor said, hands on his hips, a disdainful sniff aimed at no one in particular.

He clapped once.

"Try not to embarrass yourselves too much this time."

The man flowed through the stances. Anyone who slipped, even slightly, got barked at, shoved, or had their grip physically adjusted. Luke thought some of the kids looked fine... but, well, what did he know?

When it came to him, though, no yelling. Just a long, flat stare that made Luke's skin prickle. Then, the faintest nod.

After bombing archery, it was… something. A win, if he was being optimistic.

Then the man decided he was tired of kids falling face-first into the dirt just from practicing moves, and figured he'd give them a *real* reason to get up close and personal with the ground.

With a mean flint in his eye, he barked, "Pair up! Time for a duel."

Aubrey was already cutting a line toward him when Katherine shrieked, smacking away something Barry had thrown at her.

"Barry! Knock it off!" Aubrey immediately snapped.

And just like that, the opening was there. Levi slid in, amber eyes glinting with mean intent, blocking Luke's path.

"I'll be your partner today, newbie." He didn't ask. His hands did the talking instead, shoving Luke toward the center of the arena.

Then he was on him.

Luke barely got his sword up in time, just enough to block a blow that would've split his skull if the weapon hadn't been wood. Even dulled, the strikes came vicious, snapping at wrists, ribs, kneecaps.

Every swing was aimed to hurt.

His feet tangled as he tried to step back, to put some distance between them, sword held high to block the barrage. But he was clumsy, delayed, like his head moved faster than his limbs.

"You're not special," Levi sneered, teeth bared. "Just a brat who lucked into a big-name daddy."

*Big-name daddy?!*

Luke snapped forward, blade flashing. He feinted high, dragged Levi's guard up, then twisted, smacking the flat of his sword into Levi's ribs with a crack.

Levi staggered, wheezing. Luke didn't blink.

"And you're just a miserable creature who does nothing but whine." His voice came out colder than he meant it to, but he didn't particularly care. It was enough to make the older boy flinch.

Levi's face twisted.

"Fuck you, you silver-spoon brat!" he roared, charging with his sword lifted overhead.

But in his rage, Levi got sloppy.

Luke's eyes flicked upward, caught the opening, and slipped into the blind spot of the swing, driving his head forward with everything he had.

The crack was sickening.

Levi dropped, blood streaming through his fingers, howling on the dirt. "He broke my nose! He broke my nose!"

"I'll break more things if you don't shut up, seu fela da puta do caralho[1]," Luke spat, voice vicious.

"What did you call me?" Levi shrieked, trying to sit up, outrage overriding pain.

Luke was already lunging when a hand snagged the back of his shirt and lifted him clean off the ground, dangling him in the air like a stray kitten.

“Duel’s over,” the instructor barked. His tone carried more amusement than scolding. “As much as I enjoy a good beat down, save some for the rest of you little brats.”

Slowly, Luke came back to himself. Oh Lord. He’d made a scene. Well—*Levi* had made a scene, but Luke had definitely participated.

Mortified, he flicked his gaze up from beneath his lashes.

The ring was silent, every eye fixed on him. Even Aubrey had paused—Barry still squirming in a chokehold—pride flickering across her face before she smoothed it away.

“Small brat,” the man grunted, giving Luke a casual shake. “Not bad. Bit more flailing than an actual duel, but bigger brat there wasn’t much better. Still, you’ve got the bones of a fighter.”

“Thank you, sir…” Luke said, legs still kicking in the air.

“Hah! Polite now, hellion?” The man chuckled as he set him down. “Come spar my pack of blockheaded siblings sometime. They’ll make you sweat.”

Luke managed a nod. But no, *thank you.* The last thing he wanted was to hurl himself at a squad of bloodthirsty brutes much bigger than he was.

“Someone drag this brat to the infirmary!” the instructor barked, already striding off toward Levi, who was still howling through bloody hands.

“Talented.”

Luke flinched.

Behind him stood Axel, exactly like a winter apparition. Closing in fast came Aubrey, bumping Axel’s shoulder with hers, grinning.

The snowman studied Luke with that same unblinking stare as always.

Aubrey, meanwhile, was glowing like she’d just won the fight herself.

“Of course he is! He’s my brother.” She planted a hand on Luke’s head and ruffled his hair. “Good job teaching that brat a lesson.”

“He took after you.” Axel smiled—Lord witness this miracle.

Luke gawked. The ice statue actually could *emote*. Barely. But it was there.

“That he did,” Aubrey said smugly, straightening. “And I’m sure he’ll do just as well in the racing lesson.”

“Quick on his feet,” Axel agreed.

The instructor’s voice cut through the moment, edged with anger. “No—brat! You’re not dying, and if you don’t shut up, you’ll wish you were!”

They watched as Levi was carried off by a few Cabin Seven campers, who studied him like he were an odd specimen. The buff instructor followed, massaging the bridge of his nose with an irate look—probably off to file a report, or whatever it was instructors actually did—

*Wait*.

Luke furrowed his brows. Did instructors get a wage? Like… real money?

“Well,” Aubrey drawled, one brow arched as she tracked the strange procession. “Seems the lesson’s over. Let’s head to the next one.” She tilted her head at Luke, lips curled. “We’ll be having lunch somewhere else today. More space for one. You’ll like it.”

With a whistle, Aubrey led Cabin Eleven north, away from the cabins and deeper into the forest, the trees swelling larger the farther they went. Passing the stables, Luke slowed, catching the sight of wings. The pegasi tossed their heads, restless, manes flashing like silk.

Awe crept in despite himself, though he caught himself quick.

He’d never even ridden a normal horse. Imagine one with wings.

Still… flying on the back of something like that would be a childhood dream come true.

“Campers!” A voice rang out—melodic, drifting from thin air.

Luke glanced around the grove where they’d stopped, confused, until a handful of dryads melted out of the trees to greet them. His heart nearly gave out when one woman snapped herself free of the wood like it was nothing more than a Tuesday. He just stared, blinking in astonishment.

He recovered quickly enough. Axel handed him a basket one of the nymphs had left in his arms with a giggle, the girl covering her mouth and squinting her eyes as she looked between the snowman and Luke’s sister for some reason.

Luke paid it no mind.

Soon, they were all working. Campers and nymphs spread blankets, unpacked baskets, and before long more dryads arrived from… somewhere, arms laden with fruit, bread, and honey.

*Did the nature spirits have their own turf inside the forest?*

It was pleasant—until the nymphs noticed him.

“Look at him!” one of the nymphs cooed, cupping his face. “Like a lost little fawn.”

Fingers pinched his cheeks from both sides. “So precious.”

Another nymph ruffled his hair, then stilled. Both hands sank in, tousling gently like she was giving him a head massage.

“His hair is so pretty,” she crooned. “Little waves, blonde, and soft.”

It was like being paraded as a doll. Aubrey wasn’t helping. She had one hand over her mouth, eyes crinkled with amusement, simply watching the show. By her side, Axel stared on with his dead-fish eyes, but Luke was picking up the same vibe off him as Aubrey.

Y'know. *The* vibe.

Luke scowled and jerked his head back.

“Ohhh, he glared!” one of them squealed, pinching harder. “He's so *cute*.”

Luke’s answering glower only made them coo harder, as if he’d lit up a neon sign that said *pinch harder.*

He was rescued by a loud clap.

An older woman strode up, stern-faced, skin like bark, hair vivid green. She stood with hands on hips, cutting through the chaos like a schoolteacher about to assign detention.

The younger dryads immediately scattered at her look.

“You know the drill. Form a line and run when I signal.”

“Instructor Holly,” Aubrey said, stepping forward. “We’ve got a newbie today.”

“Is that so?” Holly hummed, dark eyes sweeping over Luke. “The young one comes with me.”

A flick of her hand dismissed him from the group.

“Nysa! You take over for now. I’ll be back soon enough—I’ll be assessing the child.” She barked the order at a younger dryad, who scampered to take her place. Then she strode off, clearly expecting Luke to follow.

Which he did, his feet moving on instinct.

They stopped at a small clearing tucked deep in the forest, a mid-sized circle rimmed with trees. It looked like something out of a book he’d read once, like a fairy ring out of European folklore.

…Though maybe that only counted if there were mushrooms.

“Show me how you run.”

Luke blinked. *Run*? But he obeyed, jogging a circle around the clearing.

Holly's eyes tracked him, narrowed, thoughtful in a way that made him feel like a horse at auction.

"That's enough." She snagged the back of his shirt as he passed, yanking him to a halt that nearly choked him. "You're fast, and your form's decent. But your posture's sloppy, your footwork uneven, and your stride too long."

*Isn't running just…running?* Luke bit down on the thought before it escaped.

"Again. Watch your posture."

He ran. Again. And again. Each time she barked a correction: *shoulders back, land lighter, shorten your stride.* By the time she finally grunted in approval, his chest burned.

"Now let's see how you do in the race, now that you're not strutting like a newborn foal," was the last thing she tossed over her shoulder before marching him back to his cabin-mates, all of them flushed and sweaty.

She stopped, gaze unreadable.

Then lifted her whistle with merciless glee.

"Line up. Another race."

The collective groan shook the grove—even the nymphs joined in—but still, everyone lined up, waiting for their cue. Luke found himself unceremoniously shoved into a spot in the middle of the row.

A shrill blast of the whistle echoed, and they all sprang forward.

Luke shot ahead, blowing past poor Katherine, whose snail pace at least came with resigned determination. Axel, stoic but red-faced, slipped into his peripheral vision as Luke pushed harder. Aubrey still held the lead, her siblings straining after her, but even she couldn't close the gap on the nymphs, who laughed as if the earth itself carried them.

Muscles screaming, Luke drove himself faster. The finish line burned in his sight, a red flag, the only thing that mattered. To his own shock, he surged past Aubrey and even slid by a pair of younger nymphs. But his legs were too short, his body too young to outmatch the older dryads.

Even so, he stumbled across the line, lungs searing, and collapsed onto the grass. Every bone in his body felt heavy.

"Fast." Axel's pale face hovered over him. Aubrey appeared next, worry written across her brow.

"Are you okay?" She pulled him upright before he could answer.

"I'm fine," Luke panted. "Just tired."

Understatement of the year. His limbs felt like wet sandbags.

Holly strode up, expression stern but satisfied. She clapped slowly.

“Very impressive, young one. Not many can outpace a nymph—especially at your age. We have a long history of running from enamored gods, after all.” She gave him a long look. “Speed like that will serve you well.”

Luke blinked at her, unsure whether that was supposed to be a compliment or a warning. He managed a hoarse, “Thanks,” and took a cup of water from a dryad who hovered nearby.

“You have the swiftness of the Messenger in you,” Holly said, some unreadable flicker crossing her face. “Truly, you are a child of his.”

He knew it was a compliment, but it sat wrong. Being compared to Hermes never felt like praise. And running belonged to *him*, not to Luke. Swordsmanship, though, that was Luke’s. Maybe that’s why book-Luke had excelled at it: unlike speed, a blade couldn’t be claimed by anyone but him.

Or at least that’s what he told himself.

“I guess,” he muttered when the silence dragged too long for heavy breathing to cover it.

Holly smiled. A sad, knowing curve of her mouth that made his skin prickle.

“Some talents are unpleasant to train,” she said. “But if they keep us alive, they are worth honing.”

“Wise,” Axel intoned, flat as always.

“After a few centuries, you learn a few things, young man.”

“We appreciate your advice, Instructor,” Aubrey cut in, neatly cutting off whatever Axel was about to say.

“It is the duty of the elders to guide the young,” Holly said graciously, then turned away to assess the other campers, apparently done with them.

Aubrey rounded back immediately. “She’s right. You’re talented.”

“Gifted,” Axel agreed.

“Faster than all your siblings,” Aubrey pressed, “and on your first day. Not every child of the Messenger is this quick, especially without training.”

Luke knew exactly what she was doing, and he wasn’t ashamed to admit: it worked.

“But don’t I take after you? How come I’m faster?” Luke asked, eyes glinting with mischief though his face stayed solemn.

Aubrey blinked at his nonsense, then her own eyes mirrored his in kind. “Little brother—”

“Little bird!”

All three turned at once. Dean came sprinting toward them, grinning like the sun had shone just for him and made metal cans sprout from the ground. Luke nearly bolted forward to meet him, but Aubrey’s firm hand on his shoulder nailed him in place.

“Satyr,” she said, flat and venomous.

“Demigod,” Dean shot back.

“Forest,” Axel intoned.

With effort, Dean corrected, dragging each syllable, “For-rest.”

“Forest,” Axel repeated, just as slowly.

Luke couldn’t tell if it was deliberate mockery or just Axel being Axel. Either way, Dean surrendered with a sigh. “Yeah. Just like that.”

He turned his attention back. “Anyway, Luke, how are you holding up?”

“I’m fine. Tried some activities today, but I'm not that great with a bow,” Luke admitted.

“But he’s a natural with a sword. And racing.” Aubrey cut in, tightening her arm around his shoulders like she owned the bragging rights.

Dean wasn’t about to let her have them. “Naturally. My charge killed a harpy and saved me from a griffin.”

He delivered it like a trump card, eyes locked on Aubrey.

Luke’s face burned. Before things spiraled into a full-on sibling-vs-Protector duel, he blurted, “Where were you this morning, Dean?”

“Yeah, where were you, *goat*?” Aubrey echoed, her tone making “goat” sound like a slur.

Dean brushed her off like a buzzing fly. “Remember Cliff’s request? I went to track down old Brook. It took way longer than expected.”

“Should we be worried about your *Protector’s* abilities?” Aubrey’s words dripped with mock sympathy, her smile sharp.

Dean’s glare was cutting.

“Tracking a demigod before they get eaten takes ten times the care and urgency. If you’d ever done it, you’d know.” His tone oozed disdain. “Some of us do *actual* work.”

“Some of us don’t vanish when we’re needed,” she shot back.

“Some of us don’t treat their siblings like show horses,” Dean snarled.

“Forest,” Axel added flatly, as if that settled it.

“It's Forre—ah, *shut up*,” Dean snapped.

Luke stayed quiet, watching the insults fly. Aubrey’s voice sharpened, Dean’s replies turned clipped, and Axel tossed in dry little comments at random intervals, never raising his tone, but somehow making everything worse.

And beneath it all, Luke noticed it.

Dean was hiding something.

Chapter End Notes

[1]- fela da puta do caralho - fucking son of a bitch/whore
Actually, it is spelled “filho” instead of “fela” but I changed it to give more of tcham effect. This is how people from where I’m from say it (I’m Brazilian, so y’know, I’d know.) And baby Luke’s classy insulting has, shockingly, temporarily devolved to outright cursing.

Well, this chapter has many things happening.

First of all, I tried to depict Cabin Eleven’s inner politics and power dynamics. It has unclaimed together with the claimed in a tiny space, and fights breaking out would be only natural. It’s not total chaos due to Aubrey’s constant intervention. Someone give her a salary increase. And since this is pre canon, I had to just create a bunch of ocs to populate camp, since Luke was the oldest in canon and here he is just 9/10.

Aubrey’s name means “elf ruler” and I thought it really fitting for the counselor of the most troublesome cabin, which she, undoubtedly, rules with an iron fist. Add that with how Hermes’ kids are described to have elfish features then, and it made even more sense in my head.

The bow scene was something that actually happened to me a while ago. In this case, my baby niece was the one shooting like a bow master, while my arrow simply flopped on the ground. I have never seen such judgement on a young child’s face.

And my favorite scene. Luke establishing dominance. It was very cathartic.

Can anyone guess the parents of the unclaimed introduced this chapter?

Anyway, as always, I love to read your thoughts!

# Chapter 6: Childhood - Internal affairs

Chapter Notes

Edited

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Luke barely managed to dodge a stray glowing glob of death—way too close—swerving right and clinging to the rock by his fingertips. Heat brushed his skin as it passed. He gritted his teeth, dug them into the scorched black rock, and kept climbing.

He was scaling a wall. Not just any wall—no, this one had lava. *Real* lava. Someone had built it that way, like an extra "motivation" for growing demigods.

In his humble opinion, it was irresponsible. And insane.

*Especially* insane.

"Whoever had this bright idea..." he muttered, breath short, muscles burning, one hand scrabbling for a grip on a slick rock. He nearly slipped.

He risked a glance down. The ground was far—*too* far.

Yeah, he definitely wanted to find whoever dreamed up this little marvel of sadism and have a *talk*. Maybe shove a bit of lava down their throat, let them choke on just a fraction of the despair currently choking *him*.

Jaw set, he pushed harder, dragging himself past the final jut of stone. His arms trembled, lungs hot, but at last he hauled himself onto the ledge.

“Still slow. But better than before.”

Dean’s voice drifted over, lazy and infuriating. He was perched cross-legged near the edge, cheek tucked into his palm, looking Luke over as though the climb was some mildly amusing spectacle.

“I almost got hit,” Luke huffed, shooting him a glare. Easy for Dean to talk. Half-goat, and those things were unnatural climbers. He’d seen one climb a coconut tree back in the *before*.

And goats weren’t known for keeping their mouths shut, either. Yet Dean had managed exactly that these last few days. His Brook excuse had satisfied the others, but Luke wasn’t so easily convinced. He’d asked, only to be met with the same guileless smile. Completely and utterly false, he knew.

Yes. Luke was still peeved.

Dean, unbothered, tilted his head. “Chin up, little bird. You’re better than the others your age.”

And there it was. The old flatter-the-kid strategy. Fine. Maybe it had worked once or twice. But who could blame Luke for being easy? He’d always wanted to do the impossible—vault rooftops, run along ceilings, leap over people’s heads.

He blamed Assassin’s Creed and Naruto. Entirely their fault.

He turned his back on Dean deliberately, dismissive, and started down the lava-less side of the wall. Behind him, the satyr chuckled and followed with the ease of someone born to climb.

As soon as his feet hit solid ground, Luke’s attention was caught by a cluster of his siblings huddled off to the side, well away from the other campers and definitely *not* participating in the lesson.

Their laughter was muffled, shoulders shaking as another poor soul lost their grip and shrieked on the way down. Coins passed hand to hand until they gathered in the palm of a raven-haired boy, his eyes glittering as he tallied the winnings like a seasoned bookie.

“What are you doing?” Luke asked, appearing at their side with a judging little frown.

The group jolted, heads snapping up. Aubrey was conspicuously absent. Behind him, Dean trotted up and crossed his arms, sighing with exasperation, but no real surprise.

“Nothing little kids like you need to worry about,” Barry said first, shaking off the surprise. He leaned back, lacing his hands behind his head, a smirk settling on his face like he’d spent hours practicing it in the mirror.

Which he didn’t. Cabin Eleven had one full-body mirror, and it was on the girls’ side, so the rest of them, testosterone-filled morons (which Luke was *not*), had to make do with the shared showers.

And even then, *Luke* was the one who took three baths a day. If he saw Barry in water even once, it was too much.

*Like you’re all that much older than me, clown-pig,* Luke thought sourly.

“Maybe,” he said instead, tone deceptively mild. “But I’m not so sure our older sister would agree.”

Everyone’s attention snapped upward. Aubrey was scaling through the apocalypse—falling rock, spitting lava, the shudder of the wall under another quake—and she did it like it was nothing. With a flourish, she swung herself up onto the ledge, and, as if she could feel the weight of their stares, turned that hawk-eyed gaze down on them.

Conversation died. A collective flinch rippled through the group as they quickly averted their eyes, whispering among themselves.

Predictably, Abigail broke first.

“We were just training our divination skills, okay?” she blurted.

“By betting on who would fall?” Luke shot back, eyebrow raised. He didn’t buy her innocent act for a second.

“It’s an *incentive*, baby brother!” Abigail insisted, blowing a stray brown strand from her already-narrowed eyes.

Honestly, Abigail’s temper was a natural disaster all on its own, but it was even more surprising that she’d deemed this mess worth sticking around for. At twelve, she was firmly in her "do not touch me" phase.

Edward, snake that he was, bobbed his head along like he hadn’t been the one whispering schemes and pocketing his siblings’ coins.

“We would never put your name on the list, Lukey,” Jack added, too smooth, his smile infuriatingly easy.

Unbelievable. Even the second eldest was in on this circus.

“Besides,” Chase cut in, folding his arms in a mirror of Barry’s cocky posture, “you’re way better than those poor idiots falling down.”

Luke’s jaw tightened. Now they were even using Dean’s tactic against him.

“Don’t tell big sis, please!” Hugh begged, freckles bright on his flushed face as he shoved himself far too close, clutching at Luke’s shirt.

Luke shoved him back by the face, holding him at arm’s length while he weighed the plea. On one hand, prime blackmail material. On the other, he still owed them from that raid on the Camp Store—the clothes, the soap, the handful of essentials that had quietly appeared in his bunk.

“I won’t,” he said finally. “But why are you even doing this?”

His brows pulled into a frown, his disapproval clear.

Luke didn’t find it funny—entertaining themselves with other people’s pain.

Jack’s smile thinned as his gaze slid to the other campers struggling on the Climbing Wall. Aubrey—still the only Hermes kid bothering with the lesson—was scaling it again, Axel shadowing her heels as always, his eyes locked on her every move. The rest were either unclaimed or those brutish barbarians from Cabin Five.

“Tell me,” Jack said, skipping over the question entirely, “is disrespect to one’s hosts considered admirable?”

“It’s bad manners,” Luke replied, watching his brother from the corner of his eye.

“Indeed. And yet it seems our guests have forgotten the courtesy owed to those who house them.” Jack’s tone stayed pleasant, but his green eyes dripped poison.

“I don’t understand why Father didn’t kick them out after Levi’s tantrum,” Ed said, voice dripping with disdain. “Now they’re practically organizing a riot.”

“It wouldn’t be fair, would it? Where would they go?” Luke blurted, alarm tightening his chest. His eyes flicked to Ed’s.

Ed didn’t answer right away. Just rolled a drachma between his fingers, the Hermes stamp catching the sunlight.

“Do you think what they’re doing to you is fair, birdie?” he murmured.

After Luke dealt with Levi, the unclaimed had rallied—like sharks scenting blood. In turn, the Hermes kids closed ranks. Aubrey tried to calm things down, but not even she could smother a grudge that had been simmering for years. What she *could* do was watch them like a hawk. No one dared make a move while she was in the room.

But Aubrey, for all her fire, wasn’t omnipresent.

And the moment she was gone, they turned. Dumped every festering grievance on the easiest target: the youngest, and therefore weakest, child of Hermes—Luke.

His days blurred into a pattern of petty revenge.

It started with theft, but Barry and Chase always stole his things back. Sometimes with interest.

Then came the jabs. Mocking his aim, his climbing, the way his voice pitched high when they startled him. They said he looked like a little doll, that they might cut his hair while he slept. Luke kept his head down and pretended he was deaf.

But it got worse.

They made him do their chores: laundry, dishes, sweeping the floor like some kind of mini housewife. And… well. Luke was small, and they were many. He did it, mostly to avoid being shoved into a wall. Not that they ever really laid a hand on him. Not *really.* Maybe that would’ve been too much, or maybe they just saved it for the swordsmanship and wrestling lessons.

Not Levi—he was still nursing a bruised nose and a bruised ego. The older ones got handled by Aubrey before things could escalate. But the ones closer to Luke’s age?

Well. He might've been the youngest and the smallest, but there were definitely a few morons sporting tiny teeth marks on their arms and hands now.

Still, despite everything, the worst part wasn't the bullying, it was the way it warped his siblings' relationships with the rest of the cabin.

Jack, usually friendly, had gone cold. He wasn't picking fights, but his silences were loud. Ed was scheming again, always off with Barry and Chase, and Lord knew what they were planning. Hugh tried to laugh it off, but the unclaimed hunted him too, and now he flinched at shadows. And Abigail—Lord help them—muttered curses under her breath, half in Old Greek, half in something she'd probably made up, her eyes flashing with murderous intent.

"And you'd have all of them kicked out to die?" Dean's voice cracked through the tension, incredulous. "The world outside is dangerous! Look at the campers who came back from the griffin hunt—every one of them is in the infirmary. One nearly died!"

"Funny you say that, *Forrest,*" Ed said, baring his teeth in a parody of a smile as he flipped a drachma into the air.

Dean recoiled like he'd been slapped.

Jack shot Edward a sharp look, then called to the others, "Alright, enough. Go pretend to participate before Bramble shows up. I don't like the way that satyr's watching us."

The younger siblings hesitated, but obeyed—grudgingly. They trudged toward one of the lava walls, eyeing it like they were already planning how to skip the lesson without getting caught.

All except Luke.

He stayed rooted to the spot, daring Jack to do something.

Jack sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. After a beat, he decided Luke wasn't worth the headache. He took a deep breath, turned to Ed, and said, "No one is getting kicked out. We're not that cruel."

"And we don't have the authority anyway," Ed added, unhelpful as ever.

Jack promptly snatched the coin from his hand.

"But something must be done," he went on, now twirling the drachma between his fingers. "Before Father hears about this."

"Would it really be so bad?" Ed said, shrugging. "If our little brother here decided to snitch, the problem would be over in three seconds. You saw how fast he was claimed. You really think Dad would let this nonsense slide?"

Luke wasn't so sure.

Still, the mention of Hermes tugged at something in Luke's mind.

Would Hermes really punish a bunch of kids for violating his hospitality?

Maybe.

“And that’s exactly why we’re keeping this quiet,” Jack said sharply, jabbing a finger at Ed’s face. “Levi disrespecting Dad in his own cabin was bad enough. We’ll handle it. I’d rather not see our guests—rude or not—get cursed or turned into rocks.”

“I wouldn’t mind,” Ed muttered. “As long as it starts with Axel.”

Alarm prickled under Luke’s skin. He stared at his brothers, a little pale, a lot unsettled.

Would their father really go that far? Over *this*?

A story surfaced in his memory—a son’s dying wish, a father’s wrath.

“Pelops,” Luke said quietly.

The others turned to him, confused.

He twisted the hem of his shirt in his fingers. “Our father cursed Pelops’ line. Because of Myrtilus. It happened a long time ago, but… he did it.”

Jack raised a hand immediately. “No one is going to die, be cursed, or turn into a pebble. Dean, please escort my baby brother elsewhere while I have a *conversation* with Edward.”

The satyr nodded, already stepping forward. He inclined his head to Luke and gestured for him to follow.

Luke didn’t argue.

As they walked, Dean guided him toward the strawberry fields stretching out behind the Big House, passing a few campers who’d already finished the Climbing Wall. Only once they were farther from the others did Luke finally speak.

“Do you think my father would actually do something like that?” he asked, his voice low.

Dean exhaled slowly. “The gods are unpredictable at the best of times. But if things keep escalating… I am afraid something might happen.” Then, after a pause: “That said, I think Mr. D would step in before your father had the chance. He *is* the Camp Director.”

*That’s a lot of faith in Mr. D’s ability to care about us,* Luke thought, chewing on his lip.

“Don’t worry, little bird,” Dean said, catching the doubt in his eyes. “Mr. D cares more than you think.”

He gave Luke a *look*, and Luke had the feeling they weren’t talking about Cabin Eleven’s meltdown anymore.

Luke narrowed his eyes. “What do you mean by that?”

“Only that people don’t give Mr. D enough credit.” Dean’s tone was light, almost sing-song. “Just like you didn’t. Just now.”

And there it was—that guileless smile Dean always wore when he was hiding something.

Luke scowled. “Well, good thing he won’t need to do anything, because Aubrey will fix this before it gets out of hand.”

Dean’s smile faded. “For all her faults, Aubrey’s trying. Really trying. But even she won’t be able to hold the line much longer without help.”

Luke straightened up, squaring his shoulders—small frame or not—and leveled a glare at his friend.

“I don’t know what your problem with my sister is, but she’s the only reason there hasn’t been a full-blown fight yet.”

Dean knit his brows, ready to answer, but before he could, an amused voice cut in.

“Thank you for defending my honor, little brother,” Aubrey said, smiling as she emerged from between the strawberry rows, one hand resting lazily on her hip. Axel trailed behind her, carrying a basket brimming with fruit. With a look like the words physically hurt her, she added, “And Forrest isn’t entirely wrong. Keeping the peace is proving harder than I expected.”

Luke stared, gobsmacked. His sister and Dean could barely tolerate each other on a good day, and now they were *agreeing*?

“Eat,” Axel said abruptly, appearing in front of him and shoving a ripe strawberry into his mouth.

At first, Luke tried to resist. But Axel was *annoyingly* persistent, so he gave up, chewing grudgingly while glaring up at him the entire time. Still, he kept flicking his eyes toward the pair, watching Aubrey and Dean whisper to each other with growing suspicion.

Aubrey must have noticed his stare. She smacked Dean’s arm—hard.

The satyr winced, rubbing the spot, and glanced over, just in time to catch Luke’s unblinking stare.

“Well,” Dean said, brushing it off, “why don’t you head off to your chores, little bird?” He glanced around, then lifted a hand. “Grover! Over here!”

Luke perked up at the name and turned to watch the nervous figure approaching.

The newcomer looked to be around his age, with tawny skin, curly brown hair, and restless, dark eyes. A faint set of horns just barely peeked through the mop of curls on his head.

All in all, the future Lord of the Wild didn’t look like much.

Unimpressed, Luke arched an eyebrow at Dean, who was now holding the younger satyr in front of him by the shoulders like a prize turnip.

“This here is Grover Underwood,” Dean announced. “In human years, he’s about your age, and he’s *very* good at picking strawberries. Why don’t you two give it a try together?”

Axel handed Luke another berry. He took it without looking, narrowing his eyes at Dean, but before he could say anything, Grover stepped forward with a nervous smile.

“H-hi, I’m Grover. What’s your name?”

Luke exhaled sharply through his nose. “I’m Luke Castellan. Pleasure to meet you.”

To his surprise, Grover’s face lit up. He stepped in closer and grabbed Luke’s hand with both of his, exclaiming, “I know all about harvesting strawberries! I can teach you!”

Bewildered, Luke glanced quickly at the others. Aubrey was suppressing a smile behind her hand. Dean disguised his with a fake cough. Only Axel remained stone-faced, though he started shoving strawberries into Luke’s mouth with noticeably more intensity.

“Axel! Those berries are for *selling!*” Aubrey called, laughter sparkling in her eyes.

The pale man stepped back, sullen—or at least, that’s how Luke interpreted it.

Axel retreated to Aubrey’s side. She touched his arm gently and gave him a small smile, which he returned, a flicker of tenderness breaking through his usual cold facade.

And just like that, Luke understood why his siblings teased Axel so much.

But before he could do more than scowl, Dean herded him and Grover toward the rows of plants, calling cheerfully, “Come on, you two! The strawberries won’t pick themselves!”

Forced to trail after the skipping young satyr, Luke kept glancing back at the older trio, who were suddenly very interested in not looking suspicious. With a huff, he turned forward again. Whatever Dean was hiding, he’d figure it out eventually.

And the Axel *situation* could wait for another day.

“Here!” Grover chirped, stopping in front of a bush heavy with ripe strawberries. He knelt, set his basket beside him, and looked up at Luke with wide, expectant eyes.

With a sigh, Luke crouched next to him, half-listening to Grover’s excited rambling.

“…we only pick them when they’re *completely* red. And you have to be super careful not to bruise them!”

Grover demonstrated with exaggerated care, holding up a perfect berry like it was treasure. Luke followed his lead, twisting the stem gently until a ripe strawberry dropped into his palm. He held it up with a smirk.

“Wow! You’re really good at this,” Grover said, leaning in to inspect the berry. Then, with head tilted and curiosity shining in his eyes, he added, “Are you this good at your hero lessons too?”

Carefully placing the fruit into the basket, Luke said, “I’m not the best at everything, but I don’t embarrass myself either. I’m average at canoeing—anything water-based, really—and forging’s the same. But I’ve found I’m good at crafting, especially with simple materials.”

In truth, he was decent at canoeing. But he hated getting wet. Always had.

He used to kayak in his past life, and the memory came rushing back: sticky shirts clinging to damp skin, and his once-father’s snide remark—*What, are you made of sugar?*—right before the man toppled headfirst into the sea.

Luke had to choke back a laugh. Grover was watching him with wide-eyed interest.

Forging, though—that was new. And interesting. He wasn’t good at it, not really. But he didn’t mind. Creation took time and mastery demanded patience. And that, Luke thought, would make it all the more worth it.

“So you’re not bad at anything*?*” Grover asked, tentative, more a statement than a question.

Luke snorted. “Nobody’s good at everything. I’m pitiful with a bow, javelin-throwing is hard, and horseback riding… well, it’s a work in progress.”

“Um, do you—” Grover cut himself off, anxiously munching on a strawberry. Stem and all. With his cheeks puffed out and his big, worried eyes fixed on Luke, he looked completely pitiful.

“Do I...?” Luke prompted, still focused on his task. He tried to give space, the way Dean had done for him that day at the Big House.

It worked.

Grover stammered more than he spoke, but eventually, he got it out. “Do you think I could become a Searcher… even if I’m bad at most things?”

Luke paused, then turned his eyes to the satyr.

It was strange trying to reconcile this fidgeting, anxious kid with the brave man he’d once read about.

“Obviously,” he said simply. “When you want something, you sink your teeth in and don’t let go.”

Grover beamed at him, a dazzling, wobbly smile that made Luke panic slightly. If he started bawling, Luke wasn’t sure how to handle that.

Quickly, he scanned the area for a distraction.

To his right, he spotted Katherine struggling nearby. She was completely covered, Camp shirt layered over a long-sleeved black one, gloves, an old pair of jeans tucked into mud-streaked wellington boots. And most importantly: she was *destroying* the strawberries.

Each frantic tug left another berry squashed in her gloved hands.

A plan clicked into place.

“You’re a *very* good strawberry picker, Grover,” Luke said, holding up his own basket. “Look—intact berries. And you’re a great teacher, too! So how about you share that gift with someone else? Like you did with me.”

He nodded toward Katherine, who was currently mauling another berry into pulp.

Grover’s gaze followed his finger and landed on the other demigod. He forgot about crying instantly.

“She’s *crushing* the berries!” he exclaimed, springing to his feet like he'd been insulted personally. Without waiting, he marched off to intervene.

Luke stayed where he was, kneeling, letting the quiet settle over him.

He liked people well enough. But lately, there hadn’t been a moment to himself. Someone was always nearby: his siblings, Dean, even the sulky unclaimed campers.

It was… exhausting.

Still, the noise helped. The constant buzz gave him something to focus on, something to fix. There was always someone to talk to, something to solve—especially now that Cabin Eleven was quietly fracturing into two sides.

His eyes drifted to Katherine.

Unlike Levi, Kat was quiet. Careful. She didn’t rock the boat if she could help it. Her outburst on the first day seemed more like a reaction to the *dirt* than to any sense of injustice, and since then, she hadn’t given him much trouble.

She seemed like the perfect candidate to become his in on the other side.

Still debating with himself, Luke stood and strolled over to where Grover was now coaching her on the “best way to pick strawberries.”

“You forgot this, Grover,” he said, holding up the basket.

Both kids startled. But their reactions couldn’t have been more different.

Grover grinned and thanked him profusely.

Katherine, meanwhile, angled herself away from him like he’d just tracked mud into the conversation.

Taking note of her discomfort, Luke casually seated himself on Grover's other side, placing the satyr neatly between them.

He wanted allies, not enemies. No point in spooking her.

"How's the lesson going?" he asked Grover, keeping one eye on Katherine's tense posture.

"Very well! Katherine here is getting better, aren't you?" Grover beamed at his 'student.'

"Yes. I suppose I am," she said, her voice even, though her eyes flicked to Luke once.

He could practically hear the gears turning in her curly head, trying to figure out what he wanted.

Good. She wasn't dumb.

With a quiet hum, Luke turned fully to her, his expression calm. A placid smile settled on his face as cunning sky-blue eyes met guarded chocolate-brown.

"I heard you've been keeping busy in the infirmary," he said casually.

"The Far-Shooting's children were struggling after the hunt," Katherine replied, keeping her tone neutral. "So I volunteered. A few others did too."

Her gaze flicked across his face like she was working out a puzzle.

"A demigod's life is pretty difficult, isn't it?" Luke said, tone light. "Quests, hunts… everything's dangerous. It's a good thing we have Camp Half-Blood to house us."

Katherine stiffened.

Carefully, she said, "It *is* a good thing. I'm grateful the gods gave us such a welcoming place."

Luke smiled, studying her closely. "Even better is how we all help each other. Like what you're doing in the infirmary."

That made her pause. There was a flicker of something—surprise, maybe—before her eyes narrowed in thought.

*Come on, girl,* he willed silently, *take the offer.*

"Yes," she said at last, voice softer. "I agree."

She reached out and offered him one of her few unblemished strawberries. Luke smiled—genuinely this time—and traded one of his own.

Grover blinked between them, head tilted like a confused puppy. Luke found it oddly reassuring that he didn't seem to catch the subtext. Even if Grover wasn't one to gossip,

things like this always had a way of spreading, especially when Luke *really* didn't want them to.

Sometimes he wondered if it was just his luck. If he even had one of those.

*Luck? What is that?* Luke thought, humor thick as syrup, humming under his breath.

"Newbie," Katherine said softly, slicing through the quiet. "Do you have something scheduled with Chiron?"

Luke blinked. "No?"

"Well, then it seems Chiron has an appointment with *you.*"

She stood smoothly, brushing off her jeans, and began gathering her things. She thanked Grover with surprising sincerity, shot Luke a vaguely pitying glance—and then bolted. Faster than he'd ever seen her move in racing class.

He stared after her retreating figure for a moment.

Then, warily, he turned to look over his shoulder.

Chiron was picking his way carefully between the rows, doing his best not to crush the strawberries underfoot. And flanking him—of *course*—were two all-too-familiar figures: Aubrey's tall, lean silhouette on one side, and Dean's scruffy outline on the other.

Walking in step.

Like a *team.*

...*Yeah,* Luke confirmed inwardly, *I have no luck.*

With no chance of escape, Luke stayed where he was and waited as the trio approached.

"Are you ready, young man?" Chiron asked kindly.

Luke just stared.

The blank look prompted the centaur to glance at the two teenagers flanking him.

"You didn't tell him?"

"We didn't have the opportunity, sir," Dean said smoothly, lying through his teeth without flinching.

"I see... Well, Luke, Mr. D wishes to speak with you," Chiron said, vaguely bemused. He shook his head and gestured for Luke to follow.

Luke's brain finally caught up.

*What the fuck is happening? Mr. D? Wants to talk to me? This can only be a fucking nightmare,* he howled internally, though his face stayed painfully neutral.

"Luke?" Chiron prompted gently.

Reluctantly, he fell into step behind the centaur, but not before shooting murderous glares at the two traitors, who had the audacity to wave cheerfully at him.

Like they hadn't just fed him to a lion.

*No*.

A panther.

Chapter End Notes

Pelops is the same son that Tantalus served to the gods, but The Fates resurrected him and he lived to become a king.

In this chapter, we have more of the inner workings of Cabin Eleven and a hint of everyone's fear of the gods. As well as Luke becoming a player, like he is somehow in Game of Thrones instead of Percy Jackson.

Aubrey, as always, being Cabin Eleven's bogeyman.

Grover Underwood has made his debut!!! Here he is like 19, so basically 9 or 10. Same age as Luke.

And the Hermes' siblings:
Jack, angry at the guests: we must do something to make them learn!
Ed, plotting murder: let's throw them out to the monsters to eat!
Jack, sweating: let's not get ahead of ourselves, I beg you

As always, I appreciate everyone that took their time to comment! Thank you all for reading!

# Chapter 7: Childhood - Mr. D

Chapter Notes

Edited

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Luke sat with a cup of juice cupped between his palms, sipping now and then. The taste was rich and sweet, like the grapes had been grown in some perfect vineyard, picked at their ripest, and pressed the same day. But Luke knew better—there were no vineyards at Camp Half-Blood. The only reason he had such a miraculous drink in his hands was because the director allowed it.

He gripped the cup tighter to steady the tremor in his fingers.

Cautiously, he lifted his gaze to the man lounging across from him. Draped lazily in his armchair, he looked almost ordinary, even silly to the untrained eye. That would've been a mistake.

Mr. D might hide behind the guise of a grumpy, middle-aged man with tacky clothes and a sour attitude, but the… perfection of his appearance—and those eyes that caught the light in shades of purple—betrayed the truth.

He was a god.

And for some reason, that god wanted to speak with *him,* a boy who should've been far beneath his notice.

Luke dropped his gaze again, staring into his lap. He couldn't forget that fleeting glimpse of madness in Mr. D's eyes, the abyss that had seemed ready to swallow his mind whole and leave nothing but rot behind.

"Lucy," Mr. D drawled, his tone bored. "Do you know why I've summoned you here?"

"No, sir," Luke said quickly. He fidgeted with his feet, trying to sit politely.

"Respectful. Rare, in this generation's little heroes," Mr. D mused, sounding almost pleased. Then, with a sigh that was more theatrical than weary, he went on, "I suppose I must be gracious and tell you. Dean gave me his report, and I find myself… curious."

"Curious…?" Luke echoed softly, brow furrowing.

The word clicked something into place. Dean's evasiveness on their arrival suddenly made sense—he must have been acting under orders. The satyr had been watching Luke closely,

wary of another disappearing act.

Not that Dean's reasoning was wrong. Luke felt like a caged bird in this room of armchairs and sofas. If given even half a chance, he'd seize it and fly.

Unfortunately, his jailor was Dionysus.

"I can see your little brain working very hard to puzzle out my motives, child." The god leaned back with an amused smirk. "Yes. *Curious."*

"About what?" Luke blurted, eyes widening. He scrambled to add, "I mean—if I may be so bold, Lord Dionysus…?"

The god went still, silent long enough for Luke to sneak a glance upward. Mr. D was frowning at him—before rolling his eyes in exasperation.

"No need for the ceremonial act, brat. There are enough boring bootlickers around already. I don't need another."

"Then… may I ask what exactly you're curious about, Mr. D?" Luke tried again, hesitant, studying the god for any flicker of displeasure.

With a huff, Mr. D crossed his legs, propped his elbow on one knee, and rested his cheek in one hand. The posture was casual, lazy even—but predatory, too. It reminded Luke of a panther, the god's sacred animal.

*Purple flames in a void of insanity.*

The fine hairs on Luke's arms stood on end, his heartbeat pounding in his ears. He hunched his shoulders, instinctively trying to make himself smaller as Dionysus's power pressed down on him. His hands trembled so badly the juice sloshed in his cup.

*The cat ate the bird,* Luke thought faintly.

Then, just as suddenly, the weight lifted. Luke sucked in a shaky breath.

"You're a sensitive little thing, aren't you?" Mr. D mused, his eyes cooling back to bloodshot blue as he regarded Luke like some rare specimen he'd never seen before.

Too unnerved to answer, Luke stayed silent, clammy hands locked around his cup as if it were his lifeline. His grip was so tight he half-wondered if he might crack the glass. Mr. D didn't seem bothered by his silence. If anything, he looked perfectly content to wait him out.

"Well, for you to react this strongly…" the god muttered, idly stroking his chin with one finger.

Luke suspected Dionysus had intended to scare him, but the flicker of concern in the god's expression—a hint Luke hadn't thought him capable of—suggested his reaction wasn't entirely expected.

He forced a deep breath, willing his hands to stop trembling, managing it only partly. Sweat clung to his skin, not unusual after a day of berry-picking and training under the summer sun, but despite that, he felt cold.

Abruptly, Dionysus snapped his fingers. An array of food appeared on the table between them: cookies, peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, chicken nuggets, even chocolate. Junk food—rare at Camp Half-Blood, where meals were meant to be healthy. The sight alone made Luke's mouth water. He hadn't had chocolate since Greenwich, and the craving for sugar hit him hard.

Cautiously, he flicked his gaze up through his lashes. When Mr. D only stared at him with practiced boredom, Luke darted forward, snatched up a cookie, and crammed it into his mouth. He eyed the sandwiches suspiciously, eventually setting his cup aside so he could peel one open and try to scrape out the jelly.

"Is it not to your liking, Lucy?" Mr. D's voice broke through his focus.

Luke jolted, nearly dropping the sandwich—onto the floor, or worse, onto the armchair—but his reflexes saved him. He stumbled, then quickly put it back in its place, trying to hold himself perfectly still.

The god's gaze lingered, expectant.

"I-I prefer bread with cheese or eggs, sir," Luke stammered.

"Hm. Is that so?" Mr. D waved a hand. Instantly, the sandwiches shifted, jelly and peanut replaced by scrambled eggs and melted cheese. "With eggs? How *healthy."*

"It's just what I'm used to, Mr. D," Luke murmured, pulling the sandwich apart to marvel at the transformation.

Mr. D hummed. "And is there a reason for such peculiar tastes, child?"

"My grandma used to make it for me to eat for breakfast, with a serving of papaya sometimes," Luke explained, eyes darting to Mr. D's direction once before averting them again.

He couldn't possibly tell a god that it was because he used to eat this combination everyday in a past life that he wasn't supposed to remember—one that was in a different universe no less.

Who knows what would happen to him if the gods knew?

"I see… do you live with her?" Mr. D asked, refilling Luke's juice with a snap of his fingers.

"No, it's been years since I last saw Grandma." Luke tapped his nails against the glass he'd just reclaimed. "I live with my mom."

The god paused for a fraction of a second before pressing on. "And has your mother kept this healthy diet for you, all the years you've been apart from your grandmother?"

*Ah. So that's what this whole performance is about.*

"Sometimes. Mom tries to, at least." Luke's voice was stiff, guarded. Knowing the angle gave him a little more control.

"Does she? I suppose a mother always wants the best for her spawn… no matter the circumstances." Dionysus arched a brow, studying Luke with a look that made it plain he didn't buy the half-truth.

"Yes. Mom always tries her best," Luke repeated, taking a sip to hide his agitation.

Mr. D's eyes crinkled, a lazy smile curling on his lips—the satisfied look of a cat that had just trapped its canary.

Luke cursed inwardly. He'd walked straight into it.

*"Tries,"* Mr. D savored the word, rolling it around his tongue like vintage wine. "Admirable. But sometimes even the best of efforts can't prevent certain… oversights. And some of those can be quite dreadful."

With a sigh, he willed a Diet Coke into his hand.

*Like chasing a nymph you weren't supposed to, winding up stuck in a summer camp full of kids with no wine?* Luke thought furiously. *My mother's paying the price for something far nobler than that.*

"Maybe," he conceded aloud, lacing his tone with practiced subservience. "But, Mr. D, who would blame a mother for stumbling when all she wanted was to do the right thing?"

Dionysus took a slow sip, eyes locked on him. "Even if those 'stumbles' harmed the ones under her protection?"

Luke couldn't stop the flinch.

The god set the Coke aside, interlacing his fingers under his chin as he leaned in. "You're a mature child, Luke Castellan. *Too* mature. And certainly too clever. But you must understand, you don't have to defend the choices of those who wronged you. Especially not the ones meant to protect you."

Uneasy at this unexpected turn from the last god he'd expect it from, Luke grabbed another cookie instead of answering. Mr. D, surprisingly, let him chew in silence.

When Luke risked a glance, the god's purple eyes were calm—nothing like the frenzied madness he'd glimpsed earlier. It was strange to imagine the cranky Mr. D like that, but maybe Dean hadn't been entirely wrong. Maybe the god cared more than people gave him credit for.

Once Luke seemed steadier, Dionysus shifted the subject with practiced ease. "So. How's life at our charming little summer camp, Lucy?"

“It’s nice, I guess,” Luke muttered, twisting his hands.

“What is it the youngsters say these days? Cool?”

Leaning back, Mr. D conjured his Diet Coke again, slipping back into his familiar persona: the grumpy director who hated his job.

“Yes, sir.” Luke blinked rapidly.

“Do you find your activities *cool,* kid?” Mr. D asked, sounding like one of those uncles who tried to keep up with slang but only made themselves look older.

And technically, Luke supposed, he *was* his uncle.

An old one.

A *very* old one.

“Yeah, they’re cool. I like swords.” Weird as it was, Luke figured it couldn’t hurt to play along. It wasn’t like he had another option.

Mr. D rolled his eyes, nose crinkling. “As most boys your age do. But Camp offers more than swordplay. Do you like any of the others? Racing, perhaps? I hear you inherited your speed from your father.”

“I’m good at running, but I don’t enjoy it much,” Luke admitted. The nymphs’ stares during races—stares laced with emotions he didn’t want to understand—were enough to sour the whole thing. And the constant comparisons. He hated those.

“But I do like forging. And I like the Arts & Crafts Center.”

“A creative soul, huh?” Mr. D hummed, casting him a contemplative glance.

“It’s relaxing, sir,” Luke said plainly.

Art never judged him. Paper, paint, books—they gave him an escape, a way to bleed out the weight in his chest. And best of all, he could do it alone. Talking about *feelings* had never been his thing anyway.

“Indeed,” Mr. D murmured, sounding almost approving.

Luke shifted uneasily, praying he wouldn’t start picturing him as some future Hollywood star. Acting, to Luke, was the most humiliating thing imaginable. Standing in front of people, hamming it up and saying cringey lines? He’d rather peel his own skin off.

Not that he’d ever say that to the god of theater himself.

With a voice that struck Luke as far too scheming, Mr. D remarked, “And it also helps that most of the campers from Cabin Eleven don’t take part in it, doesn’t it?”

Luke stiffened, startled. *Great.* Just when he was starting to relax, Mr. D had to drop a bomb.

"What? Did you think I wouldn't know what goes on in my own territory?" Mr. D drawled, amusement flashing in his eyes. "I know all about the little rebellion going on. I even know who the conspirators are."

Luke's eyes widened in alarm, but he couldn't force out a word.

"Don't look so nervous, kid. I won't be turning brats into dolphins anytime soon. Too much of a hassle. Just imagine the paperwork." Mr. D slouched into his chair with exaggerated drama.

"But… what about my father? Does he feel the same way?" Luke asked, fiddling with his sleeves. If Dionysus knew, could Hermes also know?

Mr. D's expression soured, his lips twisting with contempt.

"Hermes doesn't know." His purple gaze cut sharp across the room. "And he will continue to be kept in the dark. It was hard enough distracting him after that Levi boy decided it was a bright idea to undermine all the children of his cabin's patron god by whining about their parentage."

Dionysus huffed.

"No. Your father's involvement would only add to the mess, not solve it."

Luke's mind raced. "Is that why you aren't interfering either?"

Mr. D arched a brow and laced his fingers over his pot belly.

"Isn't the Cabin Eleven counselor doing a good enough job for the moment? Why get involved when it can be solved amongst yourselves?"

Luke caught the implication well enough. Dionysus thought that the gods meddling would only make things worse. In other words, keep the fight between the demigods and, more importantly, keep his mouth shout around his father.

Not that it was hard. He never prayed to Hermes anyway.

He hated to admit it, but it made a disturbing amount of sense. Not all the unclaimed campers were children of the Twelve Olympians. Some of them had no cabins of their own, which was already an insult. If Hermes caught wind of the situation and decided the slight was too blatant to ignore, he might act in ways that would only make things worse—kicking the unclaimed out of Camp, or worse, turning them into some kind of bird or pebble.

That would certainly enrage the minor gods and turn a petty turmoil into a full-blown riot.

"I understand," Luke replied solemnly, meeting Dionysus' eyes for the first time that whole meeting.

Mr. D regarded him for a moment, eyebrows lifting in faint surprise. Then, with a smirk, he remarked, “You’re really too mature for your age. How *curious.*”

Abruptly, Luke realized that Dionysus had never actually answered his question. This focus on his maturity seemed too suspicious, though he couldn’t put his finger on why.

“Thank you, sir…?”

“Anyway, dinner is soon, and I tire of this conversation,” Mr. D declared, rising in one graceful movement that didn’t match the body he’d chosen. With a lazy flick of his hand, the refreshments vanished, except for Luke’s sandwich.

At the door, Dionysus paused, glanced back, and said, “We will pick up this conversation another day, Lucy. And don’t forget what I said.”

And with that, he slithered away at an unhurried pace, leaving Luke behind like he were some anti-alcohol pamphlet instead of a kid who’d just endured a bizarre talk with a god.

Since there was no reason to stick around now that his jailor was gone, Luke grabbed the sandwich and strode out, taking a bite on the way.

For all that Mr. D was a jackass, Luke had to admit—the food he magicked into existence was too good to complain about. Not that he didn’t want to, just on principle.

With an irritated glance at the darkening sky—dinner was closing in—Luke figured most campers were enjoying their free time. His cabin, though, was probably busy plotting against each other.

He dragged a hand through his hair with a weary sigh, wondering how he was supposed to meet Mr. D’s demands when his own roommates seemed dead set on killing each other.

The only way out he could see was finding help. But he’d already been lucky with Katherine. Who else could he talk to?

As Luke mulled over ways to stave off a riot, he spotted the three riders of the apocalypse—otherwise known as his brothers, Ed, Chase, and Barry—trying to jimmy the lock on the Camp Store. He neither knew nor cared what they were after. Changing course quickly, he hoped to avoid them, but Ed’s voice cut through the air before he could run away.

“Ah, perfect timing,” Ed said as Luke reluctantly wandered over. “We can both break in and test something with you right here.”

“Are we going to initiate him?” Chase asked, eyes gleaming with excitement.

“Yes, yes.” Ed waved the question away, jabbing at the door. “See this lock, birdie? Open it however you can.”

Luke gave his brothers a distrustful look before edging closer to the back door, eyeing the lock with caution.

”Tell me,” he muttered, glaring at the unhelpful idiots around him, “how exactly am I supposed to open this thing without any tools?”

Ed smirked. “Do you really need them?”

Luke huffed, already certain Edward wasn’t going to be any help—and if he wasn’t, then Barry and Chase wouldn’t be either. They were just Ed’s shadows, following along with whatever their older brother said.

He poked at the lock, prodding and testing, but without a bobby pin or anything similar, he had no idea how to get it open. When he glanced back, his brothers were still standing there, patient and expectant, like they were waiting for something to happen.

Well, so was he.

Why did everyone have to be so cryptic? First Mr. D with his strange meeting and rude assumptions, and now his brothers refusing to explain what this ridiculous exercise was even about.

Frustrated, Luke almost smacked the lock when something strange stopped him. Frowning, he reached out, fingertips brushing the metal, and suddenly the world seemed to dissolve. His focus tunneled inward, right into the mechanism itself.

To his shock, he could see the lock’s inner workings in his mind’s eye. Tentatively, he twisted his hands, and the structure shifted as though obeying him. He tinkered, adjusting pieces he shouldn’t even know existed, until—*click.* The sound snapped him back into reality. The world rushed in, and Luke staggered as the door creaked open.

A steadying hand clamped onto his shoulder. Ed, grinning with satisfaction, leaned close.

“There you go. No tools required.” He waved the others forward. “Now, onto the most important part.”

Inside the Camp Store, Luke found nothing worth the trouble. Shelves were cluttered with junk—wind chimes forged from Celestial Bronze (why anyone would waste such precious metal on that was beyond him), along with cheesy keychains of the Olympians and various monsters.

Not exactly the kind of gear a demigod, constantly fighting to survive, would spend their meager money on.

Still, not everything in the store was junk. Neatly stacked Camp Half-Blood shirts lined one corner, organized by size, with hygiene products and other essentials arranged nearby—probably to make life easier for new arrivals. Along one wall, rows of bags hung invitingly. Luke was tempted to snag one; his own was hanging on by a thread.

“Now,” Ed said, his hand still gripping Luke’s shoulder, “we’ll move ahead with the plan. But birdie here’s got his own task. Like we all did before, Luke will need to steal something—anything—and bring it back to the cabin without getting caught.”

Chase and Barry whooped, ruffling Luke's hair until he swatted them away.

"What are you guys going to do?" Luke asked, already suspicious this had something to do with the unclaimed.

"Nothing much. Just stealing stuff like it's another Tuesday, you know?" Barry replied casually, slipping into the aisles with the ease of long practice until he vanished from sight.

Ed's eyes gleamed. "We're going to give the guests—as Jack likes to call them—a little reminder of whose cabin they're staying in."

Luke frowned.

"Don't look at me like that, Luke. This is for your own good, too," Ed said, flicking a finger against Luke's forehead.

Luke wasn't fooled. Ed was using him as a convenient excuse. Sure, Luke bore the brunt of the cabin tensions, but he'd have to be blind not to notice how seriously Edward was taking this feud—far too seriously.

"If you say so…" Luke muttered, resignation creeping into his tone.

He knew better than anyone that once Ed made up his mind, there was no changing it. The only one with any real pull over him was Aubrey—no surprise there. His sister had a terrifying knack for sniffing out what her brothers were up to, paired with an air of intimidation that shut down arguments before they started.

Giving in, Luke turned his focus to what he should steal. It had to be something small and forgettable. He could always follow his brothers' example and grab essentials like a toothbrush or a new shirt—things people constantly needed, easy to pass off as lost or misplaced.

It helped that Luke could get away with almost anything. He was cute enough to bat his eyelashes, look on the verge of tears, and watch people backpedal from accusing him—assuming Aubrey hadn't already scared them off.

Slipping away from his brothers' orbit, Luke wandered the aisles. It reminded him of his time on the streets, scavenging out of necessity. But this was different.

This was a test.

Or, more accurately, a stupid dare from his idiot brothers.

He skimmed over the knickknacks until settling on a simple choice: a new Camp shirt. Oversized, nearly identical to the ones he already owned. Nothing flashy, nothing that would draw suspicion.

When he rejoined the others, Ed was lugging a bulging bag, with Chase and Barry trailing behind, just as overloaded.

“So, you went with a Camp shirt? Aren’t you a cute little bugger—and oversized, like Jack’s. People might not even notice it’s new.” Ed grinned, all smug approval.

*Cute little bugger.* Luke’s face twisted in outrage. He should kick Ed in the shin for that. Elitist little shit. Luke didn’t need condescension from a marginal* like Edward. He huffed pointedly, which Ed ignored. Rude.

“Let’s head out,” Ed said, nodding at the door. “You can try locking it with your new trick.”

And, of course, he kept making demands out of him.

Outside, Luke repeated the trick—and to his surprise, the lock obeyed. He still didn’t know how it worked, but at least it left him less dizzy this time.

Ed led them on, claiming only he knew the way. Luke didn’t buy it. This was a god’s territory. If Mr. D wanted to know what they were up to, he already did.

They finally arrived at a hidden stash, piled with stolen goods. Some were displayed like trophies, others tucked away as if saved for later schemes. Ed dumped out his bag, revealing *things* Luke was pretty sure no camper was allowed to touch unsupervised: vials of centaur’s blood, a bottle of swirling green liquid, and assorted odds and ends. Luke had no idea what Ed planned to make with any of it.

“Are you planning a murder?” he blurted before he could stop himself.

Ed only laughed, eyes crinkling with amusement. “Of course not. I’m just going to teach them a little lesson, that’s all.”

Luke raised an eyebrow, unconvinced.

“And it will be extremely unpleasant for them,” Ed admitted. Crouching as he arranged his haul in a corner, he added with a tone far too breezy to be sincere, “Maybe if you tell Dad what’s happening at tonight’s offering, we won’t need to resort to such things.”

*Is he… guilt-tripping me?* Luke thought, incredulous.

As if he’d go running to Hermes. He still held out hope this mess could be settled without escalation—he’d even managed to gain Katherine as an ally on the other side. But with Ed’s appetite for chaos and Barry’s constant habit of pestering Katherine, Luke wasn’t about to reveal anything.

“Maybe I should inform Father, then,” Ed pressed slyly, catching the frown on Luke’s face.

Dionysus’s words came rushing back.

“Ah, there’s no need. I’ll do it,” Luke blurted out. His voice softened awkwardly as he added, “It’s just… I’ve never met him before. I’ve never even prayed to him.”

Ed studied him sharply, as if trying to read his thoughts. Then, apparently satisfied, he smiled.

“Don’t worry, birdie. Father will listen for sure!” He sprang to his feet. “Let’s not waste time. Come on!”

Before Luke fully processed what was happening, he was standing in the Dining Pavilion, a plate of food clutched blankly in his hands as he faced the campfire.

He cast a nervous glance around. Ed shot him an encouraging thumbs-up. Dionysus, on the other hand, was pinning him with a glare from those burning violet eyes.

Luke knew exactly who scared him more.

Silently apologizing to his brother, Luke tossed a juicy piece of meat into the fire and whispered, “Hermes.”

“Dad,” he muttered under his breath. Then, after a pause, he tried again—“Daddy?”

That sounded cute enough.

He scrambled for something to ask, cursing everyone who had shoved him into this position: the unclaimed brats for stirring trouble, Edward for wanting to burn down the playground, and Dionysus for being downright terrifying.

Then, inspiration struck.

“My birthday’s coming up, and I’ve been thinking… I’d really love a puppy. Could you please give me one?”

He wasn’t even sure pets were allowed, but it seemed harmless enough. Maybe it would distract his father, convince him everything was fine—that his son was just a normal nine-year-old wishing for a puppy.

*Nothing to see in Cabin Eleven, Lord Hermes. Nothing at all.*

When he looked up, Luke met Ed’s gaze and wondered uneasily how long this flimsy little deception could possibly last.

Chapter End Notes

Marginal: thug

There is a whole talk about food, that isn’t actually about food.

I tried to make Dionysus seem scary and approachable. Since I imagine him as the “pretending not to care” type of guy. So, Hermes might need to be more careful as to not be replaced…I also tried to hint two of Dionysus epithets that are very relevant for this chapter.
In the end, I think Luke struggled to keep up with Dio’s changing moods.

Ed is a character that I initially envisioned as a mafia boss kind of guy. Don't know how successful that's being shown. But he is one of the people that is voting for Hermes to appear and wreck even more chaos.

Anyways, thanks for reading! As always, I love to hear your thoughts!

# Chapter 8: Childhood - Capture the Flag

Chapter Summary

Luke snitched.

Chapter Notes

Edited

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"And that's everything Mr. D told you?" Aubrey asked, her expression hardening. The change was striking—her youthful, almost elfish face sharpened until she looked far older than her years.

"Pretty much." Luke fiddled with his hands, restless.

"Worrying," Axel muttered, brows drawn together. "Gods never bring good news."

"Agreed." Aubrey sighed, leaning forward on her stool in the empty Arts & Crafts Center, elbows on her knees, fingers laced as if she could strangle the problem into submission. "And Edward wants you to tell Father?"

Luke nodded.

Her blue eyes darkened like a storm rolling in, a vein pulsing at her temple. "Edward oversteps himself."

Axel edged closer, trying to soothe. "Tiny bird bought some time."

"He did," she allowed, though her tone carried the weight of a sentence. "But for how long?"

"It's been a week already. Father hasn't answered," Luke said, letting a spark of hope slip into his chest. "Maybe he won't."

Aubrey turned to him, something unreadable flickering in her gaze. "You said you'd never prayed to him before, right? That was the first time?"

"Yes." Luke frowned. Why did that matter?

"And today's your birthday." She exchanged a worried look with Axel.

Luke blinked. “So? I don’t think Mr. D’s going to allow a dog here. And even if he did, would Dad really listen to something that childish?”

He pressed his lips into a thin line. That wish had been nothing but a desperate bluff, never something he expected to be taken seriously.

“Do you think Father cares about these *minor* things?” Aubrey asked with a weary smile, then added, “Gods follow their own rules—and even those they break whenever they like. So yes, Father will get you that dog. Because it’s the first thing you’ve ever asked him for, it’s laughably simple, and, above all, it’s your birthday.”

“It will be gifted today,” Axel said solemnly.

“Indeed.” Aubrey’s tone shifted, laced with venom. “Which means we’ll need to deal with Edward soon.”

She spat the name like it tasted bad.

“Wouldn’t Ed just think it was a birthday present?” Luke tilted his head, frowning.

“Maybe.” Aubrey conceded, though the edge in her voice made it clear she didn’t believe it. “But what about later? When he realizes Father isn’t going to act at all?”

Luke had no answer. His bluff had only ever been a way to buy time. If he was honest, he should’ve told Aubrey sooner—but somehow Ed always managed to intercept him, like he could sense when Luke was about to spill.

Or maybe Ed just didn’t want his pranks exposed.

A few days ago, he’d dumped centaur’s blood over the unclaimed campers’ clothes, sending half of them to the infirmary with blistering rashes. Katherine had only been spared because Luke barely managed to warn her in time.

Stuff like that only made Aubrey eye Ed more suspiciously—not that she hadn’t been wary already. She knew her younger brother better than anyone.

Still, today was Luke’s birthday. Ed had no excuse to cut him off when Aubrey and Axel showed up, so Luke grabbed the chance. He led them to the one place he knew would be empty—the Arts & Crafts Center. Athena’s cabin would be off scheming for Capture the Flag, leaving the room blessedly deserted.

“We need to be faster than Edward,” Axel said.

“Yes, and we need to control the narrative,” Aubrey muttered, rubbing the bridge of her nose. Axel slid closer, looping an arm around her shoulders in quiet encouragement.

“Tiny bird and Katherine,” he reminded her.

Aubrey’s eyes narrowed as the thought clicked into place. “True. We do have a bridge. If we can ease the tension, Father will be less inclined to interfere…”

“Then even if Ed told him…” Luke started.

“He wouldn’t see anything wrong, because it would look under control,” Aubrey finished, her voice firm. Then she exhaled slowly. “Still, let’s hope I can hand Father a believable excuse before Edward does something he’ll regret.”

“Troublesome boy.” Axel sighed, giving Aubrey’s shoulder a quick squeeze before pulling back. Still, he didn’t move far, his side brushing hers.

Luke caught the storm of emotions flickering across his sister’s face before she finally spoke. “Ed’s plan… I can’t let him go through with it. I don’t agree with what the unclaimed are doing either, but they’re just lashing out. It isn’t their fault—just like it isn’t ours.”

“Careful,” Axel warned, voice low.

Aubrey stiffened, her eyes darting briefly toward the sky before she forced herself to relax. “It won’t last. Sooner or later this whole mess will be settled. Then we can put it behind us, start worrying about college and… normal things. Maybe you’ll even get there first.”

“Together,” Axel said simply. His hand brushed hers, pinky hooking with hers.

The mood shifted, and Luke seized the chance to cut through their lovey-dovey nonsense, wrinkling his nose. “Are you both year-rounders?”

“No.” Axel shook his head. “Don’t draw enough monsters.”

“I was, at first,” Aubrey said. “I live too far away. Too risky. But monsters don’t bother me anymore, so I can focus on a real education.”

“They don’t teach normal classes here?” Luke blurted.

If that was true, then his hopes of a normal life were already done for. Sure, he had another life’s worth of schooling in his head, but that had been a different country, a different time.

“This is a summer camp, little brother.” Aubrey’s smile tilted, half-sardonic.

“But some kids stay here all year!” *Like me.*

Was Camp really just condemning them to live trapped in this Greek world forever? Without real schooling, what future did they have?

“Chiron handles the year-rounders. Mortal curriculum. Like homeschooling,” Aubrey explained with a shrug. “It’s enough. I struggled when I went back, but I caught up.”

“How old were you?”

Maybe it wouldn’t be *too* long.

“I went back when I was fourteen, fifteen? About two years ago.” She glanced at Axel; he gave a small nod. “I missed around three years of regular school. So don’t worry too much.”

Three years. That was way too long.

Luke's retort was already on his tongue when Axel cut him off.

"Monsters."

"You should worry more about the things chasing you," Aubrey said. Her gaze slid to the horizon, where the barrier shimmered faintly. "A griffin followed you here—that's no small monster. Until you're older, Camp is the safest place."

"Life outside is dangerous," Axel added, his icy-blue eyes hard.

Aubrey's hand rose to her chest, tracing a line down her sternum.

"It's already a miracle Jack and Ed are still with us. Not many make it to our age." Her voice was soft, tinged with grief.

The words stunned Luke. For the first time, he really thought about the age gap between him and his siblings.

He bit his tongue, torn between wanting to ask and not wanting to make Aubrey uncomfortable.

But she caught the look on his face, sighed, and said quietly, "I suppose you *do* deserve to know."

When Luke stayed quiet, Aubrey finally spoke.

"We had another sister. Older than Abigail. She had more of Father's traveler in her than the rest of us—too restless to stay still, too eager to prove herself. Some of the others mocked her for it, for being the only child of Hermes who hadn't gone on a quest." Her voice hitched. "One day she went to the Oracle. Didn't tell anyone. By the time I found out, she was already choosing companions. I begged her to take me instead. I was older, more experienced. But she said she didn't want to be coddled."

Her throat worked as she forced herself to continue. "The next day she left with two others and… she never came back."

"It's not your fault," Axel said. The words were softer than usual.

Aubrey gave him a small, strained smile, then looked back at Luke. "Ed never forgave the unclaimed, thought they pushed her into it. But…" She shook her head. "He was just a kid."

"No one is to blame," Luke said, firmer than he expected.

"That's true," Aubrey admitted quietly. She squeezed his smaller hand. "But feelings don't always make sense. And we can't control them."

Her shoulders sagged as she exhaled. "I shouldn't have put this on you. Not today. It's your birthday—you deserve a celebration, not grief."

“It’s fine.” Luke managed a faint smile. “I wanted to know.”

Aubrey tightened her grip on his hands, answering with a fond smile of her own.

“Edward is still grieving,” Axel said, cutting in.

“Yes.” Aubrey sighed, releasing Luke’s hands to lace her fingers beneath her chin. “She came right after him, and they bonded instantly. He was closest to her. But his anger is dangerous, and I can’t trust him not to try and seize the counselor position once I leave for college.”

“What? Isn’t Jack next in line?” Luke asked, frowning.

“Age isn’t everything,” Axel replied. “You need quests. Proof. Otherwise, you can be challenged.”

“And Jack…” Aubrey shook her head. “He’s too passive. Too laid-back. Too disinterested. Worse, he doesn’t sympathize with the unclaimed the way a counselor should. He’d hand the seat to Edward without a fight. Luckily, Edward doesn’t have the courage—or the respect—to challenge me. Not yet.”

Luke tried to picture Cabin Eleven with Ed as counselor. He couldn’t. In his mind, the role belonged only to Aubrey.

“So you’ll stay at Camp until you find someone worthy? Won’t that mess up your plans?” Luke asked, sympathy tugging at him.

Before Aubrey could answer, Axel nudged her side with two fingers, giving her a look Luke couldn’t read.

But Aubrey did.

She hummed, considering. “You’re right.” Then her gaze locked firmly on Luke. “The most important thing is that Cabin Eleven stays standing. I’ll wait until my successor is ready.”

Luke couldn’t protest—it was her choice. Truthfully, he didn’t even want to. He liked his sister too much, and the idea of her leaving was something he refused to dwell on.

Then a thought struck him.

“Would you have to prove yourself with quests too?” he asked, worry creeping in.

“Usually not.” Aubrey inspected her nails as if the whole topic were trivial. “But if someone completes more quests than the head counselor, they can issue a duel. No one’s dared yet. And even if they did, they’d still have to beat me.”

“Difficult to do,” Axel said, proud.

Aubrey straightened, humor flickering across her face. “Obviously! Imagine how humiliating it’d be to lose to a younger sibling.”

Luke figured her skill in combat explained why the cabin respected her. Even with tensions simmering, nobody crossed her openly—their pranks and petty revenges were always kept behind her back. That the unclaimed listened to her at all was a miracle, but she took her job seriously, and fairly. She wasn't the type to defend siblings just because they shared a father.

Ed, though… if he ever got the position, the rift would only grow. Aubrey worked to bridge it.

Still, Luke suspected Axel's presence mattered. Axel acted like an unofficial co-counselor, which probably softened the unclaimed's resentment. Watching him thumb over Aubrey's hand, Luke grimaced.

Yeah… *that* probably helped too.

A horn blared in the distance, announcing dinner—and Capture the Flag afterward. Aubrey and Axel rose in sync. With a smirk, Aubrey offered her hand and hauled Luke up.

"Now, little brother. What about victory as a birthday present?" she asked, eyes glinting.

Luke grinned back.

They slipped into the Dining Pavilion with the rest of the campers, carried along by the crowd's eager chatter.

Dinner passed in a blur. Offerings were made, plates cleared away, and then another horn blasted through the air. Campers pushed back from their seats, gathering near the tables as the atmosphere shifted, electric with anticipation.

Cheers erupted when the Athena and Ares cabins marched in, each carrying their flag. Athena's was gray, an owl perched above an olive tree; Ares' was blood-red, marked with a lance dripping paint and a snarling boar's head.

Once the flags were planted, the teams were announced. This time, Hermes' cabin was allied with Athena and Apollo, set against Ares, Aphrodite, Hephaestus, and Demeter. Dionysus' cabin remained empty.

Chiron stomped a hoof, silencing the pavilion.

"Heroes!" His voice rolled across the crowd. "The entire forest is fair game. All magical items allowed. Each team's flag must be clearly displayed and guarded by no more than two individuals. Prisoners may not be bound or gagged, but you may strip them of their weapons. No killing, no maiming. I'll serve as both referee and medic. Now—prepare yourselves!"

At Chiron's signal, the tables gleamed with gear—helmets, shields, swords, and more.

Luke wandered through the pile, only to find every piece of armor far too big. Irritation prickled in his chest.

*You'd think they'd plan for younger campers. Annabeth had been what—seven?—when she first came here.*

The thought of Annabeth, and of Thalia, landed like a stone in his gut. Guilt tightened his chest. What would become of them without another demigod to help? Had he doomed them by leaving?

When he'd run from his mother's house, survival was all that mattered. There hadn't been room for anything else. But now, with safety and distance, the doubts crept in. Maybe by avoiding them, he'd thought he could sidestep the story. Maybe he'd just been selfish. A coward, unwilling to confront a destiny he wasn't even sure was his.

He prayed they were safe. That his choices hadn't written their deaths.

"Don't make such a face, little Luke." Aubrey's voice cut through his spiral as she rummaged through the pile. "We'll find something that fits you."

When she turned back with a few pieces in her hands, Luke shoved the darker thoughts aside and schooled his face into something neutral. She helped him into a slightly oversized armor set, complete with a blue-tailed helmet marking their team. At least it didn't weigh him down.

Finding a sword was easy. Luke picked a short, leaf-bladed bronze one—small enough to fit his ten-year-old frame without feeling ridiculous. He reached for a shield, but Aubrey's hand brushed his with a light tap.

"You won't be fighting," she said, a glint in her eye. "We've got something different planned this time."

With visible reluctance, Luke set the weapons back.

"I'll try not to fight," he muttered.

"I'll hold you to it," Aubrey shot back without looking at him, already pulling Cabin Eleven into formation.

He followed with a scowl as they trailed Athena's cabin into the southern woods. Up front, Aubrey joined the other counselors, voices low as they argued strategy for what had to be the tenth time.

Movement at his side caught his eye—Levi. The older boy looked perfectly fine, like the beating from someone three years younger had never happened. Nectar really was a miracle. Still, Levi avoided getting too close, settling for glaring and whispering to anyone who'd listen.

*Idiot.*

Luke drifted in close, silent as a ghost, and popped up at Levi's side.

"Something you want to get off your chest?"

Levi flinched, then snapped, "Nothing." His eyes darted away too fast, and he edged back like standing too close to Luke might give him rabies.

Luke smirked. Personally, he thought the risk went the other way.

“Yeah. Didn’t think so.”

Levi bristled but didn’t bite. The silence from him was almost satisfying.

*Almost*.

“Luke. Over here.” Aubrey’s voice cut in.

She stood with the other head counselors, a tight circle at the edge of the field. Next to them waited a golden-haired boy, seemingly younger than Luke.

Luke had barely joined them before Aubrey grabbed his shoulders and pulled him in front of her.

“This is Luke, my little brother.”

A girl about Aubrey’s age leaned down with a bright, open smile. Her skin was a deep, warm umber with golden undertones, eyes gleaming like twin suns, her braids slipping over her shoulders as she moved.

“Hello! I’m Latifa, head counselor of Cabin Seven. Your sister was just telling us how fast you are.”

“Just how fast are you?” another voice cut in.

The speaker was younger than the girls, pale as marble, with caramel hair and storm-gray eyes that all but shouted Athena.

Luke immediately disliked him.

“He’s faster than some nymphs, Ryan. I’ve already told you,” Aubrey snapped, irritation flashing across her face.

Ryan gave a slow sniff, his tone dripping with arrogance. “So *you* have said, Gaumond. Yet forgive me if I find it difficult to entrust our victory to the legs of a child.”

Before Aubrey could snap back, Latifa rose lightly, her smile easing the tension. She gestured for the golden-haired boy beside her to step forward.

“Then why don’t we do this? The younger campers can stick together, kept safe and hidden, while an older, skilled fighter leads them across enemy lines. The others can draw attention, and if the moment comes…”

“…Luke makes a run for the flag,” Aubrey finished, her irritation fading into satisfaction. “Axel can go—he’s perfect at crowd control. And my brother already trusts him.”

Ryan’s mouth curved in displeasure. “It seems I’ve been overruled. Very well. If we must gamble on this plan, Axel is at least a sensible choice.”

Luke was pretty sure Ryan was pinning all his hopes on Axel and none on him. Insulting, but not surprising.

But that didn't mean Luke didn't want to shove his victory right in Ryan's face, just to prove he could.

"Wonderful!" Latifa exclaimed, her smile bright. She turned to Luke. "This is my younger brother, Lee Fletcher. He's a little younger than you, and new here too. Why don't you two team up? You might even become friends."

If Luke's armor was oversized, Lee's downright swallowed him. The kid wrestled with a helmet too big for his head, amber eyes—nearly hidden—glinting out from beneath.

"Hi!" Lee chirped, cheeks round and pink, his grin almost blinding in its warmth.

Yeah, Luke could see the family resemblance. Were all Apollo kids this… sunny?

Aubrey nudged him sharply, and the motion tugged up a memory of Dean. His sister and the satyr might despise each other, but the overlap was there, same subtle jabs, same "stop being a brat" energy.

"Hello," Luke muttered, polite enough. Somehow, Lee's grin managed to stretch even wider.

Ryan clapped, impatient. "Good. Introductions done. Let's get to work."

Aubrey snorted, rolling her eyes before motioning for her cabin to follow. A savage grin cut across her face. "It'll be nice to fight without worrying about capturing the flag for once."

"Just don't overdo it," Latifa chided gently, ruffling Lee's hair. She flashed Luke a warm smile before heading into the woods with the other counselors.

Soon, only Luke and Lee remained. Luke glanced around for their supposed guardian—until a hand landed on his head. He startled, already curling a fist before realizing it was Axel.

"Let's go, tiny bird. Little sun." Axel gestured toward the trees and strode off, forcing them to hurry after his long strides.

As the forest pressed in and enemy territory drew closer, suspicion gnawed at Luke. His siblings had always benched him during Capture the Flag, leaving him on allied ground.

Why risk him now?

"Hey," Lee whispered loudly, tugging Luke's sleeve. "Are we going to fight?"

Luke shot him an exasperated look. "No. We hide, and let Axel handle anyone who shows up." *Or try to, anyway.*

Had Fletcher even been listening to Latifa's plan? Then again, kids his age tended to be scatterbrained. Luke supposed he shouldn't judge too harshly.

Lee nodded eagerly and latched onto Luke's hand. When Luke tensed, the kid grinned and explained, "This way, we won't get lost from each other!"

Luke tried to tug free—subtly, of course—but for such a small brat, Lee had a grip like a vice. With a quiet sigh, he gave up and endured the Apollo chatterbox swinging their joined hands in rhythm as they walked.

Crossing into enemy lines, Axel suddenly raised a hand for silence and shoved the boys toward cover. Luke and Lee ducked behind a bush just in time to see five campers rush Axel at once. They went straight for him, like they knew better than to play fair.

Luke was about to motion for Lee to run when the sound hit—*thud, thud, thud, thud, thud*—five bodies crumpling at once.

He turned, eyes wide. Axel stood there untouched, motionless as an ice statue. He hadn't so much as lifted a finger.

*How?*

"Wow! He's so cool," Lee breathed, his amber eyes sparkling like stars.

Axel gave a curt signal, and Lee bounded out to his side, chattering nonstop about how amazing it was. Luke trailed after more slowly, eyeing the fallen campers.

They weren't really injured, only asleep. One of them even drooled into the dirt.

Narcolepsy? Yeah, *right*. Axel had done something.

For the first time, Luke studied the back of Axel's head with something close to respect.

They moved on in silence, Axel having finally shut Lee up, until he motioned for them to duck behind a cluster of rocks.

"We're close," Axel murmured.

How he knew that, Luke had no clue. But sure enough, when he peeked out, there it was—the blood-red flag perched on a massive boulder in the middle of the clearing. Two guards, maybe twelve at most, loitered nearby with swords they clearly didn't know how to hold.

"Tiny bird, on my signal." Axel's voice was clipped. Then he shot across the clearing with startling speed.

The guards panicked instantly, swinging their blades in wild arcs. Fear was written plain across their faces as Axel danced around them, every dodge smooth. He led them farther and farther away before finally cupping his hands around his mouth and blowing a long breath.

Both kids stumbled, swayed, then crumpled like drunks. Out cold.

Axel threw Luke a casual thumbs-up.

That was all Luke needed. He bolted from cover, Lee scrambling at his heels. The flag was heavier than it looked, wedged tight into the stone, but with Lee tugging alongside him they finally managed to wrench it free. Luke slung it awkwardly across his shoulder.

"Over here!" Axel barked, already moving, and Luke sprinted after him. He wasn't about to get ambushed without backup—especially not by Ares brutes. Those psychos didn't pull punches, even against little kids.

The river came into view, its banks a full-on war zone. Aubrey was in her element, laughing as she floored two opponents with a single strike. Around her, the rest of their siblings fought tooth and nail, struggling to hold ground against the chaos.

The moment Luke and his companions broke from the trees, a voice rang out:

"They have the flag! Stop them!"

Dozens of enemy eyes snapped toward them at once.

Axel slid in front, unleashing another wave of sleep that dropped a handful of charging campers where they stood. But before Luke could relax, vines erupted from the ground, coiling around Axel's legs and locking him in place.

*Great*. Demeter kids.

Luke didn't waste time, he bolted for the river. That's when a figure leapt into his path, forcing him to skid to a stop.

The boy looked about twelve, taller than Luke by a head, long black hair tied into a high ponytail and eyes the color of rusted blood. He was beautiful in a delicate way—*too* beautiful, which almost had Luke pegging him as an Aphrodite kid.

That illusion shattered the moment he opened his mouth.

"Luke Castellan!" the boy declared, voice carrying like a stage actor. "This honorable Peter Wu, son of War, demands you halt your advance and duel for the flag!"

Luke blinked. Of all the things he'd expected, a xianxia monologue wasn't one of them.

Recovering fast, he sized the boy up. The lance in Peter's hands was held with the confidence of someone who'd drilled with it a thousand times. Taller, older, stronger. And right behind him was the river—the finish line.

Luke knew he couldn't waste time trading blows.

*My apologies, honorable Peter Wu, son of War,* Luke thought dryly. *But this dishonorable Luke Castellan, son of a Thief, will not be dueling today.*

He feinted left. Peter tracked him instantly, widening his stance and lowering the lance for a strike. That's when Luke made a choice he wasn't proud of.

He kicked Peter square in the family jewels.

The boy wheezed, folding to his knees, rust-red eyes blazing even as he struggled for breath. Before he could recover, a shrill war cry rang out.

“Yaaaaah!”

Lee came flying out of nowhere, practically vaulting over Peter and clinging to his neck like a rabid koala.

Luke didn’t stick around to see the outcome. He spun on his heel and sprinted for the river, flag clutched tight. The instant he crossed the boundary, the boar insignia shimmered, bleeding into gray, a massive caduceus taking its place.

Cheers exploded. Campers surged toward him, shouting his name. Somewhere deeper in the woods, Chiron’s horn blared, the official end of Capture the Flag.

And then Luke’s feet left the ground. Hands hooked under his armpits and hoisted him high, displaying him like some trophy.

“All hail the boss baby!” Jack crowed from behind, loud enough to echo across half the forest.

Luke wanted the earth to swallow him whole.

Jack’s shout caught like wildfire. Soon the whole crowd was chanting “Boss baby!” at the top of their lungs. His face went hot when he caught Apollo and Athena campers joining in—Latifa with genuine cheer, Ryan with the kind of effort that screamed *fine, whatever.*

The chant carried all the way back to Cabin Eleven. Everyone congratulated Luke—on the win, on his birthday—until even Levi grumbled something that almost counted as praise. For the first time since he’d arrived, the air inside the cabin didn’t feel suffocating. Claimed and unclaimed mingled together, laughing, teasing, happy.

It was…nice.

Then Aubrey appeared at his side, her smile gone. She murmured just for him: “It’s here.”

At the foot of his bunk sat a package stamped Hermes Express. No one else had noticed yet, too wrapped up in victory.

Luke’s chest tightened. He stepped forward, and the chatter behind him dimmed until silence pooled in the room.

He picked up the letter resting on top. The handwriting was rushed, uneven—yet there was a clumsy sort of care to it, as if someone had tried very hard to make it neat.

*Happy birthday, son!*

*I've raced across the earth and even the Underworld to fetch you the perfect gift. I know you'll treasure him.*

*With love,*

***Daddy~***

*P.S. Don't trouble yourself with Dionysus. Your father will take care of him.*

A faint sound came from the box, soft enough that Luke almost thought he imagined it.

"Is the box alive?" someone blurted, only to be shushed at once.

Luke slipped the letter away and lifted the lid.

Two round ruby eyes blinked up at him. A tiny black puppy, all fluff, sat primly in the box, its head cocked at an almost too-perfectly adorable angle as it stared at him.

Chapter End Notes

The college stuff was always something that puzzled me. How do the demigods that stay year-round learn the necessary things to enter uni? So I decided Chiron had something to do with it, which means that he's probably overworked.

Since demigods live such dangerous lives, I thought to reveal the Hermes' siblings sad backstory to give more insight to their personalities and motivations. And it also works as a warning that Aubrey and Axel are trying to hammer into Luke's head to stop him from having any ideas.

I had to write about capture the flag, it's like The Event for camp. And also for the politicking. It couldn't not appear, especially with the Ed vying for the head counselor position. Also, Axel's godly parent is probably very obvious now, with all the making people sleep thing. On a good note, Luke is starting to accept his kind-of-stepfather/brother-in-law.

Hermes is the god of guard dogs, that's why Aubrey said it was a very easy request for him. The implications though…and then there is the letter.

Axel used Yawn, it was super effective!
I had to do a pokemon reference, it was stronger than me.
And for those who know about SVSSS, there is the brute reference and, most importantly, Liu Qingge being used as an inspiration for Peter Wu.

Anyway, thanks for reading! As always, I love to hear your thoughts! It is always appreciated!

# Chapter 9: Childhood - Puppy Diplomacy

Chapter Notes

Edited

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Fuck! Castellan, get your demon dog away from me!” Levi screamed, sprinting in frantic circles as the puppy nipped gleefully at his ankles.

“That depends,” Luke said, casually inspecting his nails. “Feeling more willing to talk to me now?”

Levi shot him a poisonous glare—if looks could kill, Luke would be shaking hands with his grandfather in the great Beyond. Heaven or hell, who knew. Still, Levi kept running a few more stubborn laps before finally breaking.

“Fine! You win! I’ll listen, just call him off!”

Luke straightened with no small amount of satisfaction, sauntered over, and scooped the pup into his arms. A few pats did nothing to quiet the low, steady growl vibrating in its chest.

The dog hated Levi on principle. Luke respected that. In fact, he shared the sentiment. But for now, they had to pretend at civility, at least enough to pass for something other than barely leashed hostility. Honestly, it wasn’t diplomacy so much as a loan shark and his tiny, fluffy enforcer putting on a show.

Levi collapsed in the dirt, chest heaving like he’d just run a marathon. Which, to be fair, he kind of had—Luke had let him go nearly forty minutes without a single break. But really, that was on the dumbass. He could’ve tapped out fifteen minutes in and saved himself the suffering.

But he hadn’t—and so Luke leaned down, studying the flushed, glaring face of the pest, a smirk tugging at his lips. Eyes narrowing with malicious intent, he brought Pipo right up to Levi’s face, snout nearly touching nose.

Pipo snapped at the air.

Levi flinched with a high-pitched, “Gah—!” that made Luke snort out loud.

Maybe it was petty for someone with an adult’s mind to bully a kid. But Luke was ten on the outside, which meant he was fully entitled to be a brat.

It was age-appropriate.

“I have a proposition for you,” Luke said, chin lifted as he looked down his nose at the boy, who was stammering and gasping like a fish out of water.

Levi sat up slowly, glare intact, even if his pride clearly was not. “Then spit it out! I don’t have all day.”

Immediately, the puppy growled again, vibrating in Luke’s arms like he was ready to launch himself and bite. Levi froze, eyes flicked warily to the dog, which was barely bigger than a soccer ball and just as round. It was amusing, really, watching him shrink from something that could fit in Luke’s backpack.

“I’ll listen! Just… don’t sic that thing on me again,” Levi said. Demanded, technically, but with the tremor in his voice, it sounded more like begging.

“First of all,” Luke corrected, sneering, “his name is not ‘thing.’ It’s Pipo. Second—” he gave Levi a pointed look—“I’m the one calling the shots here. Not *you*.”

“That’s a too-cutesy name for this… dog,” Levi muttered, brushing dirt from his clothes as he pushed to his feet. He scowled, locking eyes with Luke. “Fine. What do you want?”

Luke smiled, the kind that didn’t reach his eyes.

“What I want is very simple, though maybe difficult for an unpleasant brat like you.”

Levi bristled, his mouth already working on an undoubtly idiotic come back, until Pipo bared his teeth with a low rumble.

Levi shut up instantly.

“Help me clean up the mess you started,” Luke said, stroking Pipo’s head. The fur was so fluffy it made him want to bury his face in it and rub—something he’d already done, but only when no one was watching. Still, he had more self-control than to do it now.

“The mess I started?” Levi sneered. “So suddenly I’m responsible for every problem this cabin’s ever had? Is that what you’re implying?”

“No.” Luke’s tone stayed calm, with effort. *Think of what Aubrey said,* he reminded himself. “I meant your… outburst set off the current situation.”

Pipo quieted, ears twitching, holding so still it seemed he was listening. The sight made Luke’s lips twitch with the urge to smile—an urge he smothered, since the unpleasant brat was still on the ground, scowling at him like a sulky toddler.

Levi snorted, face twisted with distaste. “Then you expect me to shut up about the injustices the unclaimed face every day. How’s that any better?”

Luke sighed, long and weary. Levi wasn’t stupid, but he was the most stubborn little shit Luke had ever met, and that was saying something, considering Cabin Eleven’s whole ecosystem. Still, pouring oil on a fire wasn’t the same as putting it out.

The boy needed a reality check.

“Tell me, Levi, who does Cabin Eleven belong to?” Luke asked, voice deceptively airy.

“What?” Levi blinked, frowning. “Is that your new way of reminding me you Messenger's kids are the ‘real’ owners?”

“Close.” Luke shifted Pipo in his arms, cradling the puppy belly-up like a baby, which quieted some of the growls, at least.

Luke’s eyes, however, only grew colder.

“But not quite. Cabin Eleven has one owner, and you know exactly who that is.”

Levi stared, his stupid face caught between dumb confusion and stubborn outrage—until realization hit. The color drained, fear widening his eyes as he whispered, “Hermes.”

At once, the forest erupted. Birds shrieked from the branches, animals howled and barked beyond the treeline, and even the trees seemed to shudder with agitation. *Spooky,* Luke thought. But Pipo yipped sharply, wriggling in his arms, and he had to wrestle to keep hold.

The struggle shoved his unease out of his mind in an instant.

“Indeed.” Luke nodded, casual as he finally coaxed the pup into quiet, those ruby eyes blinking up at him, adorable, if a little sulky. Then, breezily, he added, “Remind me, what’s my father god of again?”

Levi tried for defiance, but it came out thin. “Roads, travelers, diplomacy… and hospitality.”

Luke smirked and began to circle him like a little predator playing at being grown.

“I’m sure you can understand my worries, can’t you?”

Levi dragged a hand down his face, silent for a long beat. Then, with a grimace, he met Luke’s eyes and exhaled, “Fine. You win. Just tell me what I have to do.”

Luke’s smile warmed at that, finally genuine. Levi’s support would be helpful, especially to bridge the gap between the Hermes kids and the unclaimed. Katherine had been the first step. If she, an unclaimed, could side with a son of Hermes at the center of all this chaos, the rest might be encouraged to do the same.

And that mattered all the more because Katherine was Barry’s favorite target—another Hermes kid.

“Hang out with me,” Luke started, lifting a hand before Levi could bark back. “I’m not thrilled about it either, but think about it: if *you*—the martyr, or whatever dumb title they’re tossing around—are seen with me, it signals things are cooling off. Maybe people will even follow your lead.”

Levi stared him down, until his eyes narrowed like he'd just cracked a code. "That's why Katherine spends so much time around you."

Luke shrugged. "And good for her. Why else do you think she hasn't made a trip to the infirmary?"

"Because of—" Levi cut himself off, biting down on his words before forcing them out. "I thought it was luck. Maybe paranoia. She changes clothes the second she smells… something's wrong."

Luke hummed, not bothering to hide his smirk. "Not paranoia this time. I warned her."

Which, of course, made the moron blow a fuse, like he'd just remembered Luke was a thorn in his side he'd nearly been fooled into tolerating.

Levi's face went red. "Then why didn't you stop your insane brother from doing it in the first place? Did the favorite son of the Messenger get some twisted satisfaction watching the rest of us suffer?"

Levi and his wild accusations. Luke nearly rolled his eyes. For all his big speeches, the guy was one of the least rational people Luke had ever had the misfortune of meeting at Camp Half-Blood.

*Favorite son,* he mocked inwardly.

What a joke. Hermes wasn't showering him with love; he was drowning in guilt over what happened to Luke's mother and tossing out empty platitudes as if they were payment. Luke wasn't stupid—or proud—enough to refuse whatever scraps that came "freely" given. But forgive? No. That was another matter entirely.

His father didn't care. Luke wasn't naïve enough to pretend otherwise. At best, he was just an extension of Hermes. At worst, property.

Pipo thrashed in his arms, tiny chest vibrating with growls, lips peeled back to flash needle-like teeth, as if he were outraged on Luke's behalf. Ridiculous, Luke mused, readjusting his grip and tightening his hold before the pup could wriggle free. Still, it was tempting to let the dog off the leash, so to speak. But this was supposed to be diplomatic—

"Privileged little shit," Levi muttered, dragging himself to his feet.

That killed whatever good will Luke might've had left—if he'd had any to begin with.

"If Aubrey can't control him, why do you think I can?" Luke snapped, patience fraying.

"Then why didn't you tell the rest of us, huh?" Levi shot back, stepping in close and looming over him—ignoring the growl building in Pipo's throat. "You act like you're better than us, just because one of your parents sits on Olympus."

"You keep your mouth shut, Levi West." Luke's tone turned razor-sharp, not the least bit cowed by a boy he'd already sent to the infirmary with a broken nose. "You think you know

shit, but guess what? This little civil war isn't a secret. The guys up there—" he jabbed a finger skyward "—already know. And they're not happy."

Levi froze like he'd just been smacked. Luke didn't care. He hadn't meant to spill that, but anger loosened his tongue more than any half-baked "get this little shit on my side" plan ever did.

"Forget it. This was a waste of time." He turned on his heel, tossing one last barb over his shoulder. "Be glad I didn't let Pipo chew on your ass."

He stormed off, ignoring Levi's shouts.

Once he was far enough away, Luke crouched to set Pipo down. The pup clambered right back, planting tiny paws on his thighs and settling in his lap like a pampered cat. Luke exhaled, quiet. His hand slid into warm black fur, and, slowly, his anger ebbed with the steady rhythm of Pipo's tail thumping against his legs.

They stayed like that for a while, sitting on the ground beneath the shade of a tree, watching the ebb and flow of the other campers. An Ares kid Luke vaguely recognized stood with arms crossed, while an Athena kid—Ryan, the pompous head counselor himself—jabbed a finger in the younger boy's face, like a fight was about to break out.

Not Luke's business.

Still, the sight tugged his thoughts back to his own chaos the night before. Pipo hadn't exactly arrived quietly. Birthday gifts from Hermes weren't unusual, but they tended to be practical—a sword, a dagger, maybe a flashy magical trinket. Not… a dog.

He remembered vividly how the cabin had erupted the second the pup popped out of the box: voices everywhere and complaints flying like shrapnel. Abigail nearly blew a gasket, shrieking about favoritism until Luke thought her head might pop off. *"It's not fair! Why do **you** get one? Dad never gave me anything!"* she'd screamed right in his face, like it was somehow his fault.

Which was a lie, because Luke had seen the weird stuff she kept. And he was pretty sure a jar with… something dark writhing inside wasn't the kind of thing a normal twelve-year-old picked up in the mortal world.

Edward, though, had gone from suspicious to delighted the moment Luke set Pipo on the floor. The pup had spotted Levi and went ballistic—barking like mad, trembling so hard Luke thought he might combust—before launching forward and clamping his tiny jaws around Levi's ankle.

Ed had laughed himself sick, swearing it was a "sign from Dad." Luke doubted that. It felt less like divine intervention and more like Pipo holding a personal grudge, since he never went after anyone but Levi.

Still, after that, the cabin's attitude shifted. Everyone treated the puppy with new caution, which Luke didn't mind—it bought him some breathing room. Pipo the Dangerous, as he'd

dubbed him, earned the name quickly. Between the sharp teeth, the ruby eyes, and the black fur, whispers about him being a baby hellhound spread fast. Honestly? Luke wasn't sure. Maybe Hermes had dragged one back from the Underworld. Or maybe Pipo was just a magical mutt with an attitude problem.

Either way, he looked more like a cursed Pomeranian than a threat to anyone's soul.

"Luke Castellan!"

The shout cracked through the air, slicing Luke's calm like a blade.

His shoulders tensed. He turned—and there was the guy. Peter Wu, if Luke remembered right. The same one he'd not-so-honorably defeated yesterday. Arms folded, hair perfectly tousled by the breeze, glaring with blood-red eyes like he thought he could burn holes through Luke's skull.

Great. A walking melodrama.

How someone like… *that* had managed to sneak up on him was beyond Luke.

"How can I help you, son of War?" he asked sweetly, pushing Pipo off his lap with a gentle nudge. The puppy huffed in protest.

"I demand a rematch," Peter declared, voice heavy with gravitas. He raised a single finger and pointed it right at Luke's nose. "I refuse to be bested by such dishonorable means again."

Luke swatted the finger aside. "An honor, truly. But I'm *terribly* busy with… personal matters."

Peter narrowed his eyes, and Luke suddenly had the suicidal urge to fling himself off a cliff, or better yet, call that griffin back to finish the job properly. Because of course the brute wasn't going to just walk away. Why would Luke's life ever be that easy?

"Busy?" Peter scoffed, crossing his arms tighter. "I see you wasting time petting a dog. Fight me."

Luke dragged a hand down his face. *Children*. Such unreasonable little creatures. And Peter didn't even question why there was a dog in Camp, which, frankly, was the strangest part.

"Sorry, but no," Luke said firmly. "I've got more important things to deal with."

Like salvaging what Levi had just wrecked. Like maybe finding Katherine.

"Excuses," Peter growled, puffing himself up to his full height. For a twelve-year-old, he was tall, towering over Luke in a way he clearly thought was intimidating. "Fight me."

Luke braced. Pipo snarled. Peter tensed, ready to lunge—

Then froze, spinning on his heel into a defensive stance.

Behind him stood the very girl Luke had been thinking of.

Katherine blinked slowly, her face tightening with the faintest trace of disgust as she wiped the hand that had touched Peter's shoulder with a handkerchief. To be fair, Luke thought, Peter didn't look particularly clean; his appearance suggested he'd either just put someone in the dirt or been put there himself. Both seemed equally probable.

"Are you busy, Luke?" she asked pleasantly, casting Peter a sidelong glance before stepping back—very deliberately—as though he were a speck of dirt best avoided. "There's someone who wants to speak with you."

Luke flicked a glance at Peter. To his surprise, the weirdo only looked mildly annoyed, arms crossed and wearing what might've been a thoughtful expression—or maybe just a constipated one. Hard to tell.

But since the boar was quiet, Luke turned back to Kat. "Not really. I tried talking to Levi, like I told you, but… it didn't go well."

Katherine hummed—no opinion given—then flicked her hand in a vague *come along* gesture before pivoting away.

Luke stood, slapping dirt and Pipo's black fur off his pants, already trailing after her, when Peter cleared his throat. In that stiff, formal tone, he declared, "Very well, Luke Castellan. Our duel shall be postponed. It appears you were, in fact, truthful about your errands."

And with that, he bowed—*actually* bowed—and strode off. Luke could only stare at his retreating back, baffled, until Katherine's gentle tug pulled him along.

They circled back to the spot where Luke had talked—well, fought—with Levi. It was near the forest, usually empty, but close enough to the cabins to catch the trumpet calls, one of Luke's favorite places, honestly. The boy was still there, sitting cross-legged in the dirt, brow furrowed like he'd been chewing on his thoughts the whole time.

Luke stopped short, scooping Pipo into his arms before the pup could even think about charging. To his surprise, Pipo went limp and quiet, content to be held.

Katherine side-eyed him. "He talked to me about a few things," she said, patting his shoulder with only her fingertips, like she wasn't entirely sure she wanted to touch him but did it anyway, because it felt expected. "I think he'll be more receptive now."

With that, she drifted to a nearby tree, giving them space.

Luke took a breath, stepped forward, and stopped in front of Levi. His own temper had cooled; he could admit now he'd gone too far earlier.

Levi coughed, clearly nervous, then blurted out, "I'm… sorry. For the things I said. And did. I wasn't being very fair to you."

Luke studied him. Levi looked distinctly uncomfortable, but sincere enough. And honestly, Luke had no good reason to keep stewing except for pure pettiness. So, with all the grace of a

cat forced into a bath, he muttered, “I’m sorry too. For letting Pipo run after you.”

He very deliberately did *not* apologize for breaking Levi’s nose. That had been deserved—and self-defense. Case closed.

Levi snorted, raking a hand through his dark hair. The look he shot Luke said *I know exactly what you’re doing*, but Luke ignored it.

“I’ll help you,” Levi went on. “The cabin’s a mess, and I hate this—” he gestured vaguely with both hands “—as much as you do. If sticking around you is what it takes to, I don’t know, make it suck less, then fine. I’ll do it.”

Clearly, Katherine had worked some kind of miracle on him.

“Alright,” Luke said carefully, shooting Levi a sidelong look. “Just know—what I told you stays between us. And Katherine, of course. Our head counselor’s already aware and handling things.”

Levi nodded gravely. “I’d be willing to swear on the River Styx if need be.”

Luke froze, staring like the boy had grown a second head. A minute ago Levi had been ready to strangle him, and now he wanted to toss around unbreakable oaths?

“No need,” Luke cut in quickly, waving him off. “I’ll trust you’re not interested in starting a cabin-wide panic.”

For a long moment Levi just looked at him. Then, to Luke’s surprise, he smiled. “You know, Castellan, you’re not as bad as I imagined you to be.”

Frowning, Luke asked, “What do you mean by that?”

“Nothing, brat.” Levi chuckled and strode off toward Katherine. “Let’s go. The gossip mill needs a show if this make-friends-and-prevent-a-riot nonsense is going to work.”

“More like the two instigators finally called a truce,” Luke murmured, half to himself, watching Levi with a puzzled frown. He stared when Levi tried to sling an arm around Kat’s shoulders in a show of friendliness, only for her to expertly sidestep. Meanwhile, Pipo darted around Luke’s heels, tail wagging.

They trudged in silence, soon arriving at the common area.

By late afternoon, the Camp was buzzing. Cabins spilled open with kids laughing, sparring, or lounging, but Luke felt every pair of eyes tilt his way. Whispers stirred as campers noticed who walked beside him—Levi, of all people—and the little black pup trotting at his side.

“Is that Levi?”

“Since when does he walk with Luke?”

“And whose dog is that?”

“The Messenger gave him a *puppy*? The rumors were true?”

Luke blinked. He hadn’t realized his feud with Levi had spilled beyond Cabin Eleven. It had always felt like an internal issue the other cabins wouldn’t care about. No, scratch that. Kids were busybodies. Of course they’d know. The comments about Pipo were expected, though—pets weren’t exactly Camp-standard.

“What’s with the look, brat?” Levi cut in, eyes fixed straight ahead.

Luke mirrored him. “Didn’t think the other cabins knew about this.”

Katherine snorted. “Not exactly a secret, newbie. Cabin Seven saw the beat-down. So did Five. And Cabin Five’s head counselor—you know, the sword instructor?—has been tossing his little siblings at you during training. At least when you didn’t bail.” Which, Luke admitted, was often. “People notice.”

Levi’s ears reddened at Kat’s words, probably from the memory of being sent to the infirmary by a kid three years younger. “They know we fought, but they don’t see how divided our cabin is. Which, honestly, is for the best. Don’t want the…” He glanced around discreetly, then lowered his voice. “…the little know-it-alls butting in where they’re not wanted.”

Luke found himself agreeing. He remembered how the cabins had split sides during the Zeus-Poseidon situation in the books. Sure, this wasn’t nearly that bad, but kids loved picking sides in things that weren’t their business. The last thing they needed was this mess spreading any further.

Mr. D’s words floated back: *Why get involved when it can be solved amongst yourselves?*

“So we solve it before the others catch wind of this,” Luke said firmly. The other two nodded.

They rounded the cabins once, started on a second. Then—

“Luke! Here!”

Automatically—and yeah, stupidly—Luke turned his head, only to be nearly blinded by Cabin Seven, glowing like someone had built a lighthouse in the middle of Camp.

At night it passed for normal—fancier than Eleven, sure, with its polished paint, gold trim, sun motif on the roof and another stamped above the door. Even the floor had a lyre carved into it. But during the day the whole place threw sunlight in every direction, a radiant, blinding beacon that made Luke squint like he was staring into an actual star.

A small figure bounced in front of the cabin, haloed in all that glow. Judging by size alone, Luke guessed it was Lee—but then again, who knew? Until last night, he’d thought he was the only kid under twelve here. And really, Apollo whored his way through half the country as much as Hermes, which made his cabin the second-largest in Camp.

He squinted.

The little figure was coming closer—way too fast.

Before Luke could brace himself, it launched at him, arms clamping around his waist in a rib-crushing hug.

“I didn’t see you all day! Where have you been?” Lee chirped, squeezing like he thought Luke was some stress ball. Luke, decidedly unsquishable, planted a hand on the brat’s forehead to shove him back, but the kid just latched on tighter, until Luke was actually struggling for air.

“Lee—” he wheezed.

“Yeah?” Lee finally let go, only to grab Luke’s hands like they were best friends.

Katherine and Levi traded identical looks of bewilderment. Levi, recovering first, flashed Luke a smirk sharp enough to rattle his nerves.

“He was with us, brat,” Levi answered for him, his tone dripping with condescension.

In a shocking turn of events, Lee immediately narrowed his eyes at Levi, amber gaze flaring like his cabin behind him. Technically, they were the same shade as Levi’s, but where Levi’s skewed duller, more brown than gold, Lee’s burned bright enough to be intimidating. Which was saying something, since Luke had been pretty sure the kid wasn’t even capable of unfriendly.

“I heard about you. You’re not picking on Luke, are you?” Lee demanded, stepping in front of Luke like he was his personal bodyguard.

Levi barked a laugh, clearly entertained. “Yeah, I’m that guy. You got a problem with that, kid?”

Lee bristled, rising on his toes with righteous indignation, but Luke shoved him back before the brat could embarrass him further.

“They made up,” Katherine cut in smoothly. Bless her.

At her words, Lee’s scowl evaporated. He slid right back into sunshine mode, not even fazed by Luke’s push.

“Great!” He beamed, turning all that relentless energy back on Luke. “Come on, follow me! I’ll show you my cabin!”

Luke blinked slowly, already drained. He flicked a glance at Katherine, then caught Levi smirking, clearly enjoying every second. Fine. If Luke had to suffer, so did he.

“But I can’t just abandon my two *friends.* They’d be heartbroken without me.”

Humans were social animals, which meant if Luke suffered, everyone else was damn well going to suffer too.

Lee scrunched up his face, really thinking it over—the first time Luke had ever seen him uncertain about anything. Then again, he’d only met the kid last night, so maybe he wasn’t

qualified to judge.

“Fine. They can come,” Lee finally declared, though the sulky pout on his face suggested he’d been forced into a noble sacrifice. That threw Luke off; he’d figured a sunshine kid like Lee would want more company, not less.

Before he could poke at it, Pipo let out a small huff, pulling Lee’s attention.

“Puppy!” Lee dropped to his knees, all reluctance forgotten as his hands sank into Pipo’s fur. The puppy, usually wary of strangers, tolerated it. More than tolerated—he wagged his tail.

Excuse me, *what?*

Luke narrowed his eyes. Sometimes he wondered if Pipo was smarter than he let on. Maybe hellhound biology, maybe weird magic, or maybe Hermes being Hermes—or all three. Hard to say, and Luke wasn’t about to lose sleep over it.

Levi cleared his throat, pointedly ignoring the puppy love-fest. His gaze on Pipo was edged with wariness. “Weren’t you going to show us your cabin, brat?”

“That’s right!” Lee jolted upright, as if he’d completely forgotten his own invitation. He waved them along toward the shining cabin behind him, enthusiasm back at full blast. “Come on, Luke! You’ll love it! There’s a cot in the middle for when someone’s sick, and flowers from where Dad was born, and even a library with tons of books!”

The word "library" caught Luke’s attention like a hook.

Apollo was the god of prophecy, wasn’t he? That meant some kind of connection to the Fates. Maybe—just maybe—there was something in there he could use.

Caught up in the thought, Luke didn’t notice Pipo slip away.

By the time he turned, the pup was already in the arms of a man he didn’t recognize. The figure wore a wide-brimmed hat, his face buried in shadows that seemed far too dark to be natural.

The man didn’t even glance back. He just strolled off toward the Big House, cradling Pipo like he belonged to him.

A shiver shot down Luke’s spine. The air pressed against his ears, muffled, like he was underwater. And through the haze came the worst part: that bone-deep prickle of familiarity.

Chapter End Notes

Finally, we’re starting to solve Cabin Eleven’s problems. With some difficulty, since people are complicated.

Luke is also making some friends. Lee is kinda like an adorable, friendly leech, latching on Luke and not letting go.

On Pipo the Dangerous, he is the tiny guard puppy Hermes gave Luke, but is he just that? Dunno. We'll find out later.

Anyways, thank you all for reading! As always, I love to hear about your thoughts!

# Chapter 10: Childhood - Counselor

Chapter Notes

Edited

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They stepped inside, and the moment they did, Luke blinked.

It caught him off guard. He'd braced for the same blinding glow as outside—totally illogical, sure, but still. Glowing walls would've made living here a nightmare.

Instead, the place was… plain. White walls, as bland as hospital paint, broken only by a few hooks hung with coats and weapons that added the only splash of color. Bunk beds lined the sides in perfect order, with a single medical cot in the middle. Just one. Luke squinted at it, wondering if it was for practice, or if kids here really needed patching up that often.

A glint caught his eye, pulling it toward the corner. Yellow flowers—Lee had said they came from Delos—sat in the window boxes, sunlight catching on their petals. In the far corner, bookshelves groaned under the weight of texts, giving the space a strangely homey feel.

Homey and modest weren't exactly the first words Luke would've pinned on the Bright One, but here they were.

And those books—Jesus, his hands itched. They were written in Old Greek, which meant they were actually readable; no letters fighting him every step.

Not that it meant Luke didn't fight that battle anyway. He read all the time, even if it was slow. But he did.

"Do you like them, Luke?" Lee asked, eyes fixed on Luke's face as if ready to catch every flicker of expression.

*What the hell is this kid's problem?* Luke thought, immediately schooling his face to hide the discomfort crawling up his neck.

*Little glowing sunny weirdo.*

"I like reading," he said at last, shooting the kid a sidelong glance before narrowing his eyes at the lineup of books.

There were so many, stacked from the floor all the way to the ceiling. Luke's hands twitched again.

No one would miss one, would they—

"You can check them out! Come on, I'll show you!" Lee blurted, grabbing his hand before Luke could sidestep the lunge.

"And what about us?" came a grumble from behind, Levi muttering to an exasperated Katherine as they followed.

"Keep quiet," Katherine hissed back. "We're in another cabin."

Clearly, she'd noticed the same thing Luke had: how the children of Apollo—scattered here and there, some tuning guitars, some painting, others gossiping softly—had all gone still. Their eyes followed them now, and Luke could feel it, like insects crawling over his skin.

He had the distinct sense that one wrong move would get them kicked out fast.

"Here," Lee said finally, stopping before one of the stands. He planted his hands on his hips, every bit the proud little musician waiting for applause.

Well, Luke wasn't going to give it.

"Thanks, Lee," Luke said absently.

"So, brat, what else besides books do you have here?" Levi asked from behind.

"Don't call me brat—"

Luke tuned them out, eyes drifting over the spines. Medicine. Music. Poetry. And, of course, shelf after shelf of biographies, glossy retellings of Apollo's life, polished so bright they almost outshone the cabin's walls.

But no Marsyas. Not a single word about the satyr Apollo had skinned alive.

The omission rang louder than any trumpet.

*Suspicious*.

He tapped his fingers against his chin. There was a book about Apollo's loves, with several flowers on the cover—each one, Luke realized, probably meant a lover turned into a plant. Another was titled *Delphi: A Tale of Victory,* with a serpent Luke assumed was Python battling a tiny figure that had to be Apollo.

His fingers skimmed along the wood as he moved down the shelves, eyes flicking over each title, until one caught his attention.

*The Theft of the Sacred Herd.*

Luke's mind snapped back to earlier—to that man. The stranger who'd walked off with Pipo.

And now he remembered: the same stranger who'd linger outside his mother's house for hours, just… staring.

Back then, Luke had hidden inside, curtains drawn, heart thudding every time a floorboard creaked. His mother had only made it worse with her mutters about Hermes coming soon, about how the god would want to see his dearest boy. Like she'd sensed something was wrong but tried to explain it away.

Ominous didn't even begin to cover it.

At least Pipo had gone willingly, tail wagging, Luke told himself. Surely nothing bad would happen to him.

He shook his head and forced his focus back to his task.

Not easy, with Lee buzzing beside him, rambling about who-knows-what; Levi piping in with, "I doubt it," "not even that impressive," clearly hiding some jealousy, Luke wagered; and Katherine eyeing a section of the bookshelf like she wanted to take a book but didn't dare. Luke didn't blame her—not with how Apollo's older kids glared daggers at the visitors from Cabin Eleven.

Distracting. Annoying. And not at all surprising; his cabin had a reputation, and some of his siblings were less pleasant to be around than others.

He would've known.

Funny, really. Hermes and Apollo were supposed to be close, myth-wise, but clearly the Bright One's brood didn't care to play nice with the Messenger's.

Luke stared at Lee's oblivious face for a moment before huffing.

Lucky for Lee, he seemed blissfully unaware.

"Lee," he cut in—sharper than he meant to—then softened his tone. "Do you know how these books are organized?"

Lee startled, his pout scattering away like dust. Then his face scrunched up as the question sank in.

"I don't know," he muttered after a long moment, glaring at the bookshelf like it had personally offended him.

Luke resisted the urge to roll his eyes.

*Calm down, kid. You'll crack the code of alphabetical order once your teeth grow back.*

He paused, frowning. *Wait… at what age did normal kids learn that again?*

*Whatever.*

“It’s fine,” he said instead, pacing the shelves again. Sixth time now, and still nothing. No mention of the Spinners. No in-depth treatises on Apollo’s prophecy powers.

Maybe hidden. Maybe censored. Either way, asking would get him tossed out on his butt before he could blink. The way Cabin Seven’s older kids were watching, even whispering *prophecy* out loud felt like tempting fate.

“What are you even looking for?” Levi cut in, arms folded behind his head, sounding bored.

“Nothing important,” Luke deflected smoothly.

Dean had taught him that lesson the hard way: one innocent question about the Fates had earned him a lecture and a headache. He wasn’t making that mistake twice.

“Just curious. Nice touch, having a personal library in the cabin. We could use one.”

“I agree.” Katherine perked up at once, nodding eagerly. Her eyes flicked toward the corner, lingering on the stacks of medical texts.

Sometimes she helped out in the infirmary, so Luke figured she had the right to borrow one. But judging by the hawk-eyed stares from Cabin Seven, they didn’t think the same.

Levi, of course, scoffed. “We barely have space to sleep. Where would you even put a bookshelf?”

Lee gasped, his amber eyes going wide. “You don’t have one? How do you learn about your godly parent then?”

*Learn*, Luke mocked inwardly.

He eyed the shelves again, skeptical. Did they actually tell the truth about Apollo—or just what Apollo wanted his kids to believe?

He’d bet on the latter.

But whatever brainwashing was tucked between those spines, that was a problem for future Luke.

He shot a sidelong glance at Levi and Katherine, gauging their reactions with a careful eye, tongue ready to intervene at the first sign of self-righteousness from the big-mouthed idiot.

Lee was young; he probably didn’t realize his innocent question could hit a nerve.

Luckily, neither looked ready to explode. Katherine only frowned slightly, while Levi—the one Luke was most worried about—just sighed, rolling his eyes like a weary older brother explaining that *no, the clouds were not made of candy.*

“Not all of us know who our parent is. That’s why we—” he gestured between himself and Katherine “—stay in Cabin Eleven. It’s dedicated to the Messenger, patron of hospitality and all that,” Levi said, his voice dripping with condescension.

“I—I knew that!” Lee puffed up at once, chin jutting forward as if that could hide the redness on his cheeks.

*There’s that, I guess,* Luke thought, exhaling. At least his cabinmates weren’t dumb enough to start a fight with the youngest Apollo kid while surrounded by his siblings.

Maybe Levi had finally learned to keep his mouth shut after all the chaos it had caused. Shame it had taken this long, but it was what it was.

Really, Luke ought to crown him with a proper nickname: Boca do Inferno. Mouth of Hell. It had a nice bite to it in Portuguese—sharper than in English—and would irritate Levi in all the right ways.

He dragged his attention back to the shelves. It was useless, but he couldn’t seem to help himself. Here he was, checking again. And again. And *again*. His fingers brushed over a title: *Delos, The Birthplace of Apollo, Lord of Prophecy and Light.*

He was still debating whether to bother opening it when the cabin door burst open.

“Calm down, Aubrey.” Latifa’s voice carried in, though even she sounded a little winded.

Luke turned just in time to see his sister stumble inside—sweat dripping down her temples, clothes clinging to her like she’d first fought someone, then sprinted the whole way here. Axel followed at her shoulder, steady-faced as ever but tense in that strange way of his.

“I am calm,” Aubrey insisted, though her ragged breathing, flushed cheeks, and wide eyes said otherwise. She looked like a spooked horse ready to bolt. “I just need to know where my youngest brother is.”

Latifa’s gaze swept the cabin, quickly landing on Luke and his group tucked near the library. Her smile flickered toward them—less warm than usual—before she caught Aubrey by the arm, steadying her with a firm hand on the shoulder.

“There they are,” she said.

Around them, the Apollo kids watched curiously, eager to see what the commotion was about. Levi and Katherine stood rigid by his side, while Lee just looked confused.

“Come. We need to go back to our cabin. Now.” Aubrey’s whisper carried through the silence when she reached him, her eyes flashing urgency.

“What’s going on?” Lee asked, tugging at his shirt, uncertainty written all over his face.

Luke felt the gut-deep urge to reassure him, but he couldn’t. He had no idea what was happening either.

The three older campers exchanged a look. Then Latifa stepped forward, her smile a shade too bright—clearly too forced.

“Come on, Lee. Say goodbye to your friends. It’s time for them to go.”

“But Luke didn’t find the book yet!” Lee shot back, brows furrowed, chin jutting out in that stubborn way Luke was starting to get used to.

Latifa froze. Like a puppet whose strings had been yanked all at once.

“He has to find his book, big sis!” Lee protested, pouting, completely oblivious to Latifa’s strange behavior.

But not Luke.

Her gaze snapped to him, and suddenly her eyes weren’t warm at all. Amber flared, burning like a low sun catching fire on the horizon. Old and endless, pressing down on him as if she could peel back every layer of who he was and who he’d ever be. Or trying to.

It felt like old knives scraping against his skin, but never cutting through.

For one split second, Luke felt exposed.

Then it was gone.

Latifa blinked, her smile returning, but her expression shifted, faintly confused, almost curious, like she was only now realizing he was different.

“He’ll… probably—” she faltered, then steadied. “He’ll find what he’s looking for soon,” she said softly. “But right now, he’s needed elsewhere. Come on, Lee. You’ll see him at dinner.”

Lee pouted but didn’t argue. Shuffling forward, he grabbed Luke’s hand and muttered, “Bye, Luke. Can you come tomorrow too?”

“Yeah, I guess. If I have time,” Luke said, sneaking a glance at Aubrey.

She wasn’t even listening. She'd already turned toward the door, knuckles white around a squirming Levi and a resigned Katherine, as if she was ready to drag them out by force.

Axel stepped into view, resting a hand on Luke’s head before speaking to lee. “Luke will come. But we need to leave now.”

Lee let his hand slip away, unhappily waving goodbye as Axel steered Luke forward, falling in line behind Aubrey.

“Damn it, woman, what the hell is going on?” Levi barked, still thrashing uselessly in Aubrey’s grip—voicing the exact question Luke wanted answered.

“Emergency meeting. Whole cabin,” Axel said for Aubrey, eyes fixed ahead as he kept stride with Luke’s uncharacteristically silent sister.

Normally, Aubrey would’ve already snapped at Levi to remember his place, but she didn’t even seem to hear him. That alone told Luke enough—something was bad.

He traded uneasy looks with levi and katherine, but stayed quiet until they slipped inside Cabin Eleven.

The place was packed. Normally, kids spread out just to breathe easier, but today every bunk and corner was filled, faces grim, the air stifling.

Luke swore the walls were pressing closer.

Every camper snapped their heads toward the door when Aubrey burst in.

“Is that—?”

“Together?”

A few double-taked at the sight of Luke willingly accompanying Levi inside, but their surprise faded fast. All eyes shifted back to the center where Ed stood, arms frozen mid-gesture. His mouth shut quickly when he saw his sister. The smile he pasted on was weak, and Luke caught the telltale bead of sweat sliding down his temple.

Aubrey dropped her hold on Levi and Katherine without a glance, striding straight for Ed. Luke felt them fall in beside him, while Axel hovered close—gaze cold, ready in case this blew up.

“You.”

Aubrey’s voice cut through the cabin like a blade. Her hand shot out, gripping Ed’s collar and yanking him up until his feet barely touched the ground. She was barely his height, but fury lent her strength.

“What were you thinking?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, sister.” His tone was smooth, his face a picture of practiced confusion. But Luke saw the truth in the small things: the way Ed’s hands clamped on hers, the flicker in his eyes.

He knew exactly what she meant.

And Luke wanted to know too.

“Do not mistake me for a fool, Edward.”

Aubrey spat the words and slammed him to the floor.

Axel was there instantly, a steady hand landing on her shoulder. It was less comfort than restraint. Luke could tell.

“Edward.” Axel’s voice was ice. “The truth.”

Most people would’ve missed it, but Luke knew the man well enough to hear the crack underneath.

Axel was just as furious as Aubrey.

Ed dragged himself up, wiping his face. His eyes darted around the cabin, searching for backup. None came. Not even Barry or Chase—his closest siblings—would meet his gaze.

The bitter smile that spread across Ed's face was thin as paper. His mask finally split.

"Fine. I told Father."

The room froze. The air went heavy—sharp, like jagged glass catching in their throats.

Then—

Aubrey snapped. Her fist shot up, but Axel caught it. Luke didn't miss the flicker of strain across his pale face, the temptation to let her finish it.

But he didn't.

Where Aubrey was fire, Axel was ice. Her fury burned; his composure froze it in place. He tempered her—always. Luke couldn't help but admire it. Axel's restraint was something he still hadn't mastered.

"Why?" Axel asked. The faint crease in his forehead was the only crack in his calm.

Ed scoffed, though his eyes never left Aubrey. "Cabin Eleven belongs to us, the true children of the Messenger. And yet you—outsiders, strays allowed here by my father's goodwill—think you can seize control. Usurp our place."

His finger stabbed toward Luke, eyes glittering with cruelty. "So yes. I told him everything. How they stole his food when no one was watching. How they made him haul their chores and laughed when he tripped. I told Father how the unclaimed broke *xenia* under his own roof, turned his youngest son into their scapegoat."

Exaggerated. All of it.

Oh well. Okay. They'd tried. But Luke had set Pipo on them, and it had never happened again, so in his opinion, they were even.

His gut twisted.

Suddenly it all fit: the "talk" with Father, Ed's reaction to the dog, every veiled threat. He'd never actually promised silence.

And Ed knew exactly *who* Luke listened to.

Betrayal sliced through him like a knife.

"You had no right," Aubrey hissed. She shoved Axel's hand off her shoulder, though she didn't lunge again—her voice was venom enough. "As head counselor, the choice was mine. Not yours. You had no right to drag Luke into this."

“Did I ruin your plans, sister?” Ed smirked. “I’m one of the eldest here. That carries weight.”

“In this matter? Absolutely not.” Aubrey’s eyes narrowed to slits, her words a low growl. “This discussion is reserved for the head counselor and Mr. D. You know that as well as I do.”

Ed scoffed, incredulous. He jerked his chin toward Axel with disdain. “And what about him? He’s neither counselor nor child of the Messenger, yet you let him speak while I am silenced?” His gaze swept the room, daring the others—Jack, Abigail, Barry, Chase, Hugh, even Luke—to contradict him. “Do you really value the voice of an outsider over your own siblings, sister?”

Aubrey’s face flushed crimson, about to blow, but Axel stepped in first, tapping her shoulder and sliding forward. His voice was calm.

And merciless.

“The children of the Messenger already have a spokesperson. That’s Aubrey. Are you saying your own sister isn’t fit for the role, Edward?”

*Holy shit. Come on, Axel. You tell him,* Luke screamed internally.

“Of course I’m not!” Ed barked, too fast. “I’m always on our family’s side!” His gaze clung to Aubrey, wide-eyed and desperate. “Sister, you know this. I wouldn’t do this without reason. I *respect* you!”

*Oh*. Luke’s stomach sank. *That’s it. He wants her seat. First step: poison the well.*

He bit his nails, useless, wishing he could throw himself between them. But there was only one real move: stand behind Aubrey, no matter what.

“Not enough, it seems.” Aubrey’s voice was ice. “Father spoke to me. He asked about *your* complaints.” Her eyes flicked to Luke, then locked back on Ed. “Do you know what that means, Edward? You forced me to lie to our godly father.”

“You simply had to tell the truth, Aubrey. Why do you insist on defending them?” Ed snapped, throwing his hands up like *she* was the one out of line. Maybe in his mind, she was.

“Because Father was not happy with *you*, little brother.” Aubrey’s words dropped like stone, her eyes hard as steel.

Her chin tilted—smug and victorious. She knew she had him.

Ed’s face drained of color. “What? But I didn’t lie!”

“Father agreed this is our issue to resolve,” Aubrey went on, cutting through his protest without a flicker of mercy. “He said it hasn’t escalated enough to warrant his hand. And he was very displeased that you dragged our youngest brother into it, when he’s barely begun to grasp this world.”

As eldest and head counselor, Hermes had placed the cabin under Aubrey's command. She was their father's voice, the chosen second, whether Ed liked it or not.

But… Ed's complaints versus her report. Two stories. How would Hermes know which was true?

Luke's stomach twisted. His mind flashed, unbidden, to that figure in the wide-brimmed hat.

It couldn't be… could it?

"Fine. You've won this time." Ed hissed, stepping in close.

Axel shifted, trying to step between the siblings, but Aubrey lifted a hand to stop him. She stood firm, letting her younger brother crowd her space, completely unbothered. Her expression stayed calm—placid, even—as she watched Edward's face.

"But remember," Ed sneered, "your reign won't last forever. One day you won't be in charge. And that day's coming fast, sister. Next year, you'll be too old for this summer camp."

Aubrey smirked, unfazed. "You're right, brother. I won't be here forever. Which is why I'll make this announcement now."

She pivoted smoothly, her voice carrying to every corner of the cabin.

Claimed or unclaimed, they all fell silent.

"I, Aubrey Gaumond, head counselor of Cabin Eleven, daughter of Hermes, name my successor."

What.

Luke's stomach plummeted. His eyes darted, searching. Jack? No, she always called him a doormat, and he looked like he wanted to melt into the floor right now. Hugh? No chance. Too squirrely. Abigail? No, too moody.

Someone else, surely—

Gasps rippled through the cabin. Ed froze, blindsided.

Aubrey's hand was pointing straight at him.

Luke's skin went cold.

*Oh no.*

*No no no.*

"Step forward, Luke Castellan," Aubrey declared. "So Cabin Eleven may see their next counselor."

*Yeah*. His feeling was right.

Luke stayed planted, blood frozen in his veins, brain empty. Long enough that Levi gave him a shove.

His legs felt like jelly, but somehow he made it to the center without falling flat on his face.

*What the hell what the hell don't look at me don't look at me—*

The cabin went dead silent. Dozens of eyes pinned Luke in place, sizing him up, searching for flaws. *Why him?* The question hung heavy in the air.

Then Axel's voice cut through.

"Axel Dahl hears and acknowledges."

The words cracked the silence. One by one, others followed—some quick, some dragging their feet.

"Levi West hears and acknowledges."

That one turned heads. Even Luke blinked. Levi, of all people? But it worked. The moment Levi spoke, others found it easier to fall in line.

Luke had told him before, his influence could tilt the whole cabin. And here was the proof.

*Maybe this is just buying time,* whispered a traitorous thought. Luke shoved it down and breathed out slowly.

Ed looked like he'd swallowed a lemon, his eyes darting around as more voices joined in. Not all, though. Chase and Barry stayed silent, torn between loyalty to their brother and their respect for their sister's authority.

It didn't matter. In the end, it was about action, and right now, they weren't doing a damn thing.

"Abigail Barker hears and acknowledges."

Luke's sister's voice snapped him out of his thoughts. Her purple-blue eyes cut at him like knives. She still hadn't forgiven him for the dog, apparently. Which was ridiculous. If she wanted one so badly, she could just ask Hermes for it. But Abigail—witch of the woods that she was—would rather hex her own shadow than accept an easy solution. At least she wasn't stubborn enough to gamble Cabin Eleven's future over a grudge.

Her words marked the last of Hermes's children to agree.

All eyes swung to Ed.

He glared at Aubrey, his lips curled in a sneer, the picture of defiance, though the twitch in his jaw betrayed his nerves. Maybe the attention rattled him. Or maybe it was the sour taste of his failure.

Luke braced for silence. Ed would refuse, or worse, just sit there smug and mute.

Then a sharp bark rang out.

The whole cabin startled. Luke's gaze darted until he spotted Pipo, sitting neat as a statue in front of Ed. For half a second, Luke swore the pup had stepped straight out of the shadows. Red eyes locked onto Ed with unnerving intensity.

Another bark—louder and several times more insistent.

Ed flinched. He clicked his tongue, sighed like a martyr, and dipped his head.

"Edward Carter hears and… acknowledges."

It came out strangled, as though Pipo himself had wrung it from him.

But Ed had spoken.

Honestly, he had no idea what his dog's deal was. But if Pipo wanted to play enforcer, Luke wasn't about to complain.

For now, at least, the cabin was under control.

Chapter End Notes

Cabin riot is done…for now. Ed is out there gunning for the position, and Luke is only 10, there is time for another faction war yet.

Fates research was a failure, which makes sense, there was no way prophecy books would be up and around for anyone to grab. In my head, the Apollo cabin hoards that knowledge like a dragon does to gold, and defend it just as fiercely.

At least, Luke has Lee now. New friend and connection as future head counselor to have access to this kind of info. A happy coincidence for Luke I'm sure.

And yeah, Aubrey told one thing to Hermes and then Ed said another, so Hermes had to act like a responsible parent for once and check for himself. That's right, the mysterious guy was Hermes. And about Pipo, well…it'll be explained in the future.

Also, we're getting very close to the time skip, probably in a couple of chapters. Then Annabeth will finally make her appearance!

Anyways, thank you all for reading! And for you, faithful commenters, I appreciate every single one of you! ❤️❤️❤️

# Chapter 11: Childhood - Olympus

Chapter Notes

Edited

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Luke sat cross-legged on his bed, Pipo draped across his lap like a smug little king. Around him, the other kids sorted through their stuff—folding shirts, polishing swords, fixing straps that were more patchwork than leather at this point.

With so few left in the cabin, everyone had their own mattress, which, thank the Lord, meant no bodies crammed on the floor, nor fights over who kicked who in their sleep. Luke inhaled in deep. The rare peace made the air feel softer somehow.

Almost too soft.

For half a second, Luke could imagine birdsong drifting in from outside, flowers blooming at the foot of his bunk, the whole place looking like one of those silly postcards that Jack collected like little treasures.

He snorted and shook the thought away. *Yeah, right.* Give it a few months and summer would pack the room wall-to-wall again. Bodies everywhere. Voices shouting over one another. The circus would be back in full swing.

At least Aubrey had spent the last weeks hammering “how not to lose control of a small army of half-feral siblings” into his head. From sunrise to lights out, it had been lessons, drills, debates, and more. Her voice always hammering into his ear. She hadn’t expected him to master everything in that time, her goal had been simply to show him what he’d be walking into.

Cabin Eleven wasn’t like the others, she’d said. And she was right.

He scratched absently behind Pipo’s ears.

“Know the rules before you play with them,” he muttered, echoing her, then sighed.

Still, none of her training changed the first step—getting the position at all. On paper, it was simple: complete a quest, earn your cabin’s approval, then, like magic, you became head counselor. Plus, Aubrey naming him successor was a nice head start.

But paper was never on his side. And in Cabin Eleven, paper didn't mean anything.

His cabin had the unclaimed kids stacked in with the Hermes' gremlins, labeled "temporary" even though some had been living here for years. And still, their voices didn't officially count, which only made their anger louder and harder to ignore.

Ed was already moving his pieces. Luke had caught him whispering with the younger kids more than once, smiling like he was everyone's favorite older brother. Promising things he had no right to promise.

Luke clenched his jaw.

For now, Ed's whisper campaign wasn't getting him far. Aubrey was still the one in charge, and everyone knew it. But when the day came for her to hand the torch over to Luke, things were bound to get messier than they should've been.

That was what weighed on Aubrey's mind. On the last day of summer, while she packed to head back home, she'd told him not to overthink it. Build bridges where he could, don't stress too much for now. She'd be back after school, she promised, and then she'd stay year-round until she felt ready for college.

(He knew what it really meant: she'd be staying until she could safely hand him the position. The thought always left guilt sitting heavy on his chest.)

Luke sighed and shook the memory out of his head, focusing instead on his backpack.

Okay.

Winter solstice.

By tradition, the remaining campers got an "invitation" to Olympus—more like a field trip, courtesy of the gods' so-called generosity.

Optional, sure. But if he stayed, he'd be stuck hauling firewood and scrubbing dishes for everyone else. Visiting Olympus—even with the risk of running into his creepy stalker of a father—still sounded like the better deal.

He double-checked his bag: clean clothes, a book, a couple of drachmas rattling in the pocket. The sight reminded him of a half-formed plan he'd been pondering about. Some kids prepared little presentations to show off for their godly parents. Luke had thought about doing the opposite, using the chance to demand a reformation of Cabin Eleven; they certainly needed the space.

It would've been useful. Maybe even brave.

Instead, he zipped up his bag, choking the thought down. Shyness had sucker-punched him again. The idea of standing in front of all those gods—every set of eyes ready to tear him apart for the smallest slip—made his stomach knot. He could already hear the judgment, sharp and cutting, the way Mr. D always managed to be. And for what? The presentations were voluntary. He didn't need to prove anything. He could just play tourist, dodge his stalker father, and head back to Camp in one piece.

“Are you ready yet, oh delicate princess?” Levi drawled, slinging his pack over one shoulder.

With fewer bodies crammed into the cabin, Levi had claimed the top bunk above Luke’s.

Ironic, really. Luke hated sleeping up high—he was convinced he’d roll off and break his neck—so Levi had taken the bunk instead. Levi. The same guy who once swore Luke should sleep on the floor now went out of his way to “sacrifice” for him. If you could even call it that.

“I am, boca do inferno,” Luke shot back, scooping Pipo off his bed and setting him gently on the ground.

Levi had saddled him with “princess” as soon as they started to… not get along, exactly, but circle each other. According to Levi, Luke was too fussy, too neat, too… pretty. He looked like a typical Hermes kid: sharp cheekbones and elf-like features. But in Levi’s eyes, Luke leaned more “dainty” than “mischievous.”

Between “princess” and “little bird,” Luke almost preferred the latter.

Almost.

“You know, I don’t even know what you just said,” Levi muttered, brows furrowed, “but I’m pretty sure it was an insult.”

“It was,” Luke said sweetly, brushing past him to join the year-rounders. Pipo padded at his heels, tail wagging. “What a joyous day. A miracle already, and it’s not even noon.”

Levi snorted and jogged up to punch his shoulder. “So now you’re calling me stupid? I take back what I said about you not being that bad.”

Luke fluttered his eyelashes innocently. Levi barked a laugh, slinging an arm around his shoulders as if they were best friends instead of frenemies.

Together they fell in step with the others heading toward a van marked *Delphi Strawberry Service*. Officially, it was for selling produce in the city, but the vans also doubled as discreet transport for demigods, especially those unlucky enough to get picked for quests.

By the driver’s side, Argus—the Camp's head of security—was already waiting, watching as the demigods filed in one after another.

Luke eyed him. Honestly, he had the uneasy impression that the hundred-eyed giant hated Cabin Eleven. Fair enough, considering Hermes had once killed him. Still, Argus mostly limited himself to giving them the stink-eye—an all-angles, once-in-a-lifetime experience.

At least he wasn’t one of those monsters obsessed with punishing children for the sins of their parents. Silent judgment was fine. Silent judgment Luke could survive.

He only had to remember the horror story of Athena’s kids and spiders to know who the real victims were in divine grudges. Though… wasn’t that whole Arachne thing from some Roman poet?

Whatever. Still a problem.

As they neared the van, Argus swiveled a hundred eyes toward Pipo. All of them narrowed at once before the giant gestured firmly: *the dog stayed behind.*

Luke stared at Argus. Argus stared back, with a hundred unblinking eyes.

It wasn't hard to tell who won that contest.

Steeling himself, Luke crouched and met Pipo's round, ruby gaze. He stroked the pup's head solemnly. "You have to stay here, Pipo. You can't go."

The dog whimpered pathetically, eyes wide, head tilted at a perfectly practiced angle of cuteness. Luke almost caved.

Before he could, Argus bent down and scooped Pipo into his arms. They locked eyes—one pair against a hundred—in what looked suspiciously like a telepathic exchange. Then, with a decisive nod, Argus set the pup down, gave him a gentle pat, and even a thumbs-up. Pipo barked once, twice, then trotted back toward Cabin Eleven, plopping down at its front like a sentinel.

Apparently satisfied, Argus turned back. Half his eyes fixed on Luke, the rest on Levi, all of them suspicious. With a curt gesture toward the back of the van, the giant stalked off to the driver's seat without a word.

"Well. That just happened," Levi muttered, blinking hard. Luke silently agreed. "Better get moving. Maybe we'll snag the good seats."

Climbing into the back of the van, Luke found it a lot more spacious than it had any right to be. Definitely some kind of magic. From the outside, you'd never guess it could carry the daily strawberry harvest *and* thirty campers crammed inside, plus a handful of satyrs.

One of them was Dean.

Luke's face lit up, and he hurried over, Levi trailing behind like a confused duckling.

"Little bird!" Dean grinned, standing to wrap him in a hug. Luke hugged him back without hesitation.

"I didn't know you came back for the solstice," Luke said, sitting down beside him, his tone carrying just enough accusation to make Dean scratch his head sheepishly.

"Wasn't sure I'd make it," the satyr admitted. "But—lucky me—I got here just in time. Visiting Olympus is always a treat."

"Were you Luke's Protector?" Levi cut in, leaning forward with that nosy stare of his.

"I *am* Luke's Protector," Dean corrected smoothly. "Dean Forrest, at your service."

"Levi West," the boy replied. "Luke's… friend."

Luke almost choked. *Friend*? That was generous. Frenemies was more like it.

"And I'm Lee Fletcher!" a voice piped up. Lee materialized out of nowhere, startling the whole row. He planted himself with all the force of a seven-year-old hurricane and declared, "I'm also Luke's friend."

Levi and Dean exchanged a look, then shrugged in unison.

Lee shoved his way between Luke and Levi, not-so-subtly elbowing the older camper aside. Beaming up at Luke, he held the smile long enough to make Luke squint at him like *what is wrong with you* before deciding to ignore it.

Maybe the kid would vanish if he didn't acknowledge him.

"Anyway," Luke said, seizing the chance to redirect, "find any other demigods lately?"

Dean nodded, settling back in. Post-summer, he'd been back on the road, tracking down half-blood kids and ferrying them to Camp. Luke hadn't seen him in months, and he was curious what stories he'd brought back.

"I did. But the boy was too young to come just yet, so a couple of other satyrs and I are stationed there to keep an eye on him until the time comes," Dean said, crossing his arms with a thoughtful expression. "I think he might be one of your brothers. He kind of looks like you, but, you know, less…"

Dean waved his hand toward Luke's face for emphasis.

"Pretty?" Levi chimed in, a cheeky twinkle in his eye. Lee nodded eagerly, fully agreeing.

Luke made a face, which only succeeded in prompting Levi to snicker and playfully poke his cheek.

How undignified.

Luke gave him some serious side-eye.

*Clown*.

"I'd lean toward cute, but yeah, that works too," Dean added, his tone as serious as he could manage, though his eyes betrayed his amusement.

"You guys are ridiculous," Luke muttered under his breath, crossing his arms and sprawling back in his seat.

"Look at you," Levi's gleeful voice, unfortunately, cut through the noise. "Pouting like a little princess."

Luke glared at him. He was *not* pouting.

But before he could fire back, the van jolted, as if about to depart, only for Edward to clamber aboard at the last second.

His gaze swept over Luke and the cluster around him, his face flickering through a storm of complicated expressions before he finally slid into the empty seat beside Abigail.

She recoiled with an exaggerated groan. "*Ugh*, why are you sitting here?"

"Love you too, sis," Ed muttered, making himself comfortable, legs stretched out like he owned the place.

Abigail scooted closer to the window, arms locked tight across her chest. "Don't touch me."

She didn't even glance at him, like sheer force of will might erase him from existence.

Luke watched from across the row, locking eyes with Ed for a split second. Both of them immediately looked away.

Their relationship was stuck in some awkward, fractured middle ground. Ed couldn't seem to decide whether he wanted to be the protective older brother or the rival circling Luke, waiting for a chance. Luke, for his part, still saw the traitor who'd sold them out to their father. It left them both playing at indifference, ignoring each other with the intensity of a duel.

"I hope he isn't planning on doing a presentation on why kicking out the unclaimed would be the best for Cabin Eleven or something," Levi muttered, his glare fixed on Ed's profile like a gun.

*Here's to hoping,* Luke thought.

He shrugged, leaning back as if he didn't care, though the tension in his shoulders said otherwise. Lee had practically glued himself to his side again, and Luke had to nudge him off just to reclaim an inch of personal space. Outside, the van rumbled toward the city, every bump and turn pulling them closer to the Empire State Building—and Olympus looming above it.

Luke doubted Ed had any grand plan worth worrying about. Even if he did, it would probably amount to nothing. Luke wasn't much more optimistic about his own plea. Words rarely reached anyone who mattered. Not the council. Not their father.

*Especially* not their father.

Hermes hadn't lifted a finger for years, why would he suddenly care now?

In the few months he'd been at Camp, Luke had started to notice a pattern: gods were creatures of habit. Maybe it was immortality calcifying them, maybe it was something else, but change didn't seem to interest them much.

Take Mr. D. If even a god who had once been mortal barely cared, then one born immortal would care even less. Not that "understanding" was ever the right word for Dionysus.

Still, Luke had grown… less afraid of him. Partially. *Maybe*. To be honest, it was just forced exposure. Sit close enough to a predator long enough, and eventually your nerves go numb.

For reasons Luke didn't want to dig into, Mr. D had decided he "tolerated" him. Which meant Luke was sometimes invited—more like dragged—into the god's me-time. Never not unnerving, especially since Mr. D had a way of asking questions that felt like tests, though the grading system was impossible to predict. One day silence got him a smile, the next day it got him a withering glare.

Dionysus seemed particularly delighted by declaring Luke "unusually mature for his age," like it was the best compliment he'd ever given anyone. Luke never knew how to react. His hindbrain always answered for him—with a jolt of cold fear.

But refusing to answer wasn't an option. He never held any control in those conversations, and he wasn't suicidal enough to try and take it.

He liked living. *Thank you very much.*

And, of course, Mr. D never missed a chance to vent about Hermes. If Luke was in earshot, he'd toss out some unflattering jab about his father—whether during those strange "meetings" or just whenever they happened to cross paths. Not that Luke disagreed with the sentiment, but being caught in the crossfire of two gods' grudges was the last place he wanted to be.

Months later, he still didn't know what Hermes had done to earn Dionysus's contempt. He only knew the god wasn't letting it go.

Lost in that thought, he felt the van lurch to a stop.

The kids around him erupted in chatter, voices bouncing off the walls. Some, like Luke, were seeing Olympus for the first time. Others were veterans, but even they were buzzing—maybe for another glimpse of the gods, maybe just for the excuse to gawk at the Empire State Building.

"Come on, I'll show you guys around. I've been here plenty of times," Dean announced, puffing up like he was their personal tour guide.

Luke followed without hesitation, stretching his legs as they walked out of the van. His muscles ached from the long ride, but Lee practically bounced beside him, brimming with energy. Levi, on the other hand, trudged along with his usual mild disinterest, like he was too cool to care about the skyscraper looming ahead.

Inside, they shuffled to a stop before the reception desk. The middle-aged man behind it didn't even glance up from his book, looking like he'd rather be anywhere else.

Argus stepped forward, silent as always, and tapped the counter with one finger.

The man ignored him.

Argus tapped again, a tad more pointed.

The man sighed, finally flicking his eyes up with all the enthusiasm of a cat forced out of a nap. “Oh, fine. Take turns. This crowd won’t all fit in the elevator.”

With that, the man tossed a key to Argus, who caught it without blinking and began herding the kids toward the elevator.

By luck, Luke and his friends squeezed into the first ride. Generic elevator music droned around them as Argus slid the key into a hidden slot above the buttons. A new button blinked into existence: *600th floor*.

Luke’s chest tightened with excitement. Reading about Olympus was one thing. Watching it unlock in front of him was another.

The elevator lurched upward. The small space pressed in on him, his nerves spiking, until a cheerful chime broke the tension and the doors slid open.

Luke forgot to breathe.

He trailed after the others, drinking in the sight. White marble steps stretched before them, gleaming against the clouds. Beyond, a city rose from the mountain like something pulled out of myth and made real—mansions with golden courtyards, bronze braziers flickering with eternal fire, columned halls stacked tier after tier. At the summit, the greatest palace of all dominated the skyline, where the Twelve Olympians themselves gathered.

The elevator doors whispered shut behind him, jolting Luke back to himself. Argus was gone —probably already ferrying up the next group.

He glanced at the other campers and felt a flicker of relief. Their wide eyes mirrored his own. He wasn’t the only one stunned by the sight.

Lee gaped openly, wide-eyed and slack-jawed like a fish yanked from water. Levi tried to act unimpressed, but every so often his eyes betrayed him, drifting toward the gleaming skyline.

“I told you,” Dean said, grinning as though he hadn’t been here before. “It’s the most beautiful thing you’ll ever see.”

“It is,” Luke admitted under his breath. If he’d had paper and pen, he might have tried to sketch it, though he knew any attempt would fall short.

The sound of the elevator rose behind them, and Argus reappeared to herd the wide-eyed crowd toward the largest palace.

They passed beneath a massive golden gate flanked by three women in flowing Greek robes. The Horai. Their sharp gazes slid over the children, disdain plain on their faces, before they turned away as though the demigods were beneath notice. Dean had been right—they were not pleased by mortals cluttering Olympus.

Luke thought they’d be used to it by now. Annual visits and all. But apparently not. Whatever. Orders were orders, and even goddesses had to obey.

The procession moved on, through gardens perfumed with roses and shaded by olive trees, where nymphs paused in their work to wave. Then came a marketplace, alive with silk-draped tents and chattering voices. Among the crowd drifted satyrs, lesser gods, and a few young women Luke suspected were Hunters of Artemis, mostly because their wild, untamed eyes and the hunter's gear slung across their shoulders set them apart.

By the time the palace loomed overhead, Luke's awe had curdled. Apprehension pressed down, heavy as stone in his chest. He tried to distract himself, watching the others chatter while his own eyes climbed the palace.

White and silver gleamed. Stairs rose to a courtyard, and beyond it the throne room yawned open, its columns stretching so high they might scrape the constellations painted across the domed ceiling. Each enormous throne held a god—even pale, cold Hades, who looked like he'd stepped out of a nightmare rather than a bureaucratic meeting.

More unsettling than the sight itself was the silence. For a hall that open, there should have been sound. Murmurs, echoes, anything.

Instead, there was nothing.

That was when Luke noticed one of them staring. A man with olive skin and black curls, a wide-brimmed hat shadowing bright blue eyes too sharp to be human.

Luke immediately decided he'd seen enough. He ducked behind Dean like a child hiding from a parent in the grocery store.

"What's wrong, princess?" Levi asked around a bite of apple—where he'd gotten it, Luke didn't want to know.

"I don't think I can do my presentation…" Luke muttered, palms clammy, eyes darting back to the silent thrones. The god's gaze was elsewhere now, fixed on something in his hands, but that didn't help.

Levi followed his line of sight, hummed, and shrugged. "Relax. You're a brat, nobody expects much. Good news? I snooped, and I don't think Edward's going to do it either."

"Me neither!" Lee piped up, brows scrunched in earnest concern as he puffed out his little chest.

Being compared to a real kid wasn't flattering, but it worked—Luke felt a little better knowing Ed wouldn't be giving a presentation either.

"Well, since none of you are going to showcase your talents—or whatever you brats do to impress your parents—we can stroll around and take in the sights," Dean said, turning to Luke.

Only the faint twist of his mouth betrayed his worry. Luke smiled, relieved. "I'd like that."

The others chimed in, and right on cue, the meeting broke up. While the mass of demigods and satyrs streamed into the throne room with Argus in tow, Dean steered them the other way.

Luke hurried after him, the hair on the back of his neck prickling. Something—or someone—was watching. His quickened steps set the pace for the others until they were flat-out running, weaving through streets they definitely weren't supposed to be in.

They pulled up short in a quieter district. Luke stopped so suddenly Lee smacked into him from behind.

"Where are we?" Lee mumbled, rubbing his nose.

Dean cast a wary glance around. Then, suddenly, he went pale.

"Oh no. We can't stay here. This is…" He looked around again, as if expecting a ghost to materialize, and then whispered, "The Moirai."

Luke's head snapped up. He found the place easily enough: a lone, small house tucked apart from the grander residences. On the surface, it looked ordinary, but the air around it was wrong.

It made sense, in a way. The Fates didn't need gold or columns, everyone bowed before them eventually.

He was already edging closer when Levi, deadpan, said, "Let's go check it out."

"Are you insane?" Dean hissed, clutching his curls like he might rip them out by the roots. His hooves clacked against the stones as he stumbled after them.

Levi snorted, dismissive. "We're just taking a look. You can stay back if you're that scared."

Luke glanced at Dean—half wanting to agree with him, half pulled forward by curiosity. His feet betrayed him, following Levi step for step. Lee scurried after, gripping Luke's hand so tightly his palm went clammy. Dean muttered curses but still trailed after them, jumping at every shift in the shadows.

The closer they got, the heavier the air became. Not thick like fog, more like a pressure, invisible hands weighing on his shoulders.

Luke knew this feeling. His mother's kitchen. Her screams.

One step. Then another. Until the four of them stood before what Dean had called a house. But house didn't feel like the right word. It looked like a temple—a small one—and yet it loomed larger than the palaces behind it.

"We've looked. That's enough. Let's go." Dean's voice cracked. His skin was pale, his pupils blown wide, like a goat cornered by a tiger.

Levi's mouth curled with a retort—then the building lit up.

A glow bled out of the cracks, like light had been caged too long and was clawing its way free.

A beat of nothing.

Then—

*Flashes*.

Luke saw his past life.

(His once-mother laughing, hair tumbling in her face. His once-father's gruff words, softened by kind eyes.)

Then his present.

(Mom's wind-tossed blonde hair, laughter and madness twined together. Hermes, smiling that mischievous smile, blue eyes glinting in the dark.)

And his future—

Just jagged shards, glass cutting him from the inside. He couldn't string them together.

Couldn't breathe—

And then it was gone.

The glow winked out. The house looked ordinary again.

Four boys stood trembling in its shadow.

Levi broke first. "Yeah…" His voice rasped, thin and shaky. "Yeah, that's enough."

He stumbled as he turned, not even checking if the others followed.

Dean nearly sprinted, dragging them back toward the public streets, now crowded again after the presentations had ended.

Argus caught them at the edge of the square, his hundred eyes narrowing like he knew something. After a long, squinting stare, he gave the smallest shrug, deciding he didn't want to.

Only then did Levi and Lee collapse onto a bench, laughing breathlessly, the kind of nervous laughter that comes after doing something you shouldn't and somehow getting away with it.

Luke didn't laugh. He could still feel the fragments burning behind his eyes.

Was that what Latifa meant that he'd find what he'd been looking for?

Chapter End Notes

Last chapter with Luke as a 10 year old. Finally! Next chapter is the time skip, and things are going to get more nebulous and complicated in Luke's life.

So, Luke cant do much of anything to defend his position now. He is only 10 after all. But not to worry, Aubrey will stay as supreme leader until he is ready to defend his position. Now, he's just preparing for it, making connections, that kind of stuff. And he’s scared of Dionysus, a room full of them? He would be shaking on his boots, especially when they choose to appear in a form more than five times his size.

For Ed, hes not a bad guy, just traumatized boy with skewed priorities. He's the type that cares about family, but is also kinda callous with anyone else. Meanwhile, Levi is now best buddies with the kid that broke his nose, a surprising development to everyone involved. And Lee is a kid, a jealous kid. When he grows, will it become worse or better? We'll see.

The Fates had to make an appearence and the foreshadowing too...And Hermes is creeping out his son, which is understandable when you learn your father had the habit of staring at you from behind windows.

As it is the last chapter before the time skip, I must ask. What did you guys think of Luke's journey until now? What about your favorite moments?

Anyway, thanks to all of you for reading!

# Chapter 12: Teenhood - Growing up

Chapter Notes

Edited

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Are you sure you’ll be alright?”

Luke bit his lip, watching anxiously as Aubrey slung her backpack over her shoulder and buckled the sword at her hip.

She gave him a look, equal parts fond and amused. “When did you turn into such a mother hen, little brother? I’ll be fine.”

Luke narrowed his eyes at her. She looked too thin—thinner than she’d been just a month ago—and the shadows under her eyes betrayed her exhaustion. Axel wasn’t faring much better. The late nights dealing with Ed, the constant planning, the endless quests, they were grinding both of them down, even if neither would admit it.

One day, they’d stumble. And when they did… it wouldn’t be something you could walk back from.

Aubrey’s smile faltered under his stare. She ruffled his hair, then leaned down until sky-blue met sky-blue. “I will come back, Luke. I’m strong. And Axel’s coming with me.”

“I’ll bring her back,” Axel said, tucking the last of his things into his bag before pulling the strap over his shoulder. He hadn’t changed much in years—still the same pale, stoic snowman—but the drag in his movements was there, subtle, and nothing like his usual slowness.

Aubrey smacked his arm, glaring playfully. “If anything, I’ll be the one hauling you back. How many times have I saved your hide now?”

“More times than I can count,” Axel replied fondly, looking at Aubrey in a way that made Luke want to bury his head in the sand like an ostrich. But he resisted the urge. There were other things that still needed to be said.

“Do you think it’s a good idea?” Luke asked. When both of them frowned, he clarified, “To leave me here alone, while Ed hasn’t even asked for a new quest yet.”

Aubrey and Axel exchanged glances. The snowman blinked slowly; Aubrey made a face. Then Axel nodded, tipping his chin toward Luke, prompting Aubrey to sigh a heavy gust of

air, as if they'd just had a long, conflicted discussion instead of, y'know, exchanging eyebrow wiggles and meaningful looks.

*I don't know how she does that,* Luke thought, watching the silent exchange. *Maybe they've got some secret language for deciphering his expressionless glacier face.*

Aubrey inhaled and reached out, smoothing Luke's hair from his face. You'd expect it to turn into a mess, but, of course, it fell right back into place. Courtesy of the Aphrodite hyenas, who'd enchanted it into eternal surfer-boy waves, no matter how much he complained. Even now, after a week of avoiding them, he still looked like he'd stepped straight out of a salon.

"You'll do well. I trained you myself." Her voice softened for a moment, then hardened, firmer now, though still carrying that playful edge. "And it's time you learned how to handle rivals without me hovering over your shoulder."

"I don't rely on you all the time," Luke shot back, cheeks heating—not that he was embarrassed, *of course.*

"Tiny bird isn't ten anymore. Needs to stand on his own two feet," Axel said, flicking Luke's forehead. He easily dodged Luke's retaliatory swipe, a barely-there smirk on his lips.

"Besides, Edward is our brother," Aubrey said firmly. "As annoying and problematic as he is, he values his family." She clapped her hands, decisive. "So stop worrying. You're my chosen successor. Act like it, and you'll be fine."

"Your siblings prefer you over him," Axel added with a nod.

They sounded so sure. Luke wished he could share that certainty.

"I'll do my best," he promised, though doubt gnawed at the edges.

"That's all we ask," Aubrey said warmly, pulling him into a hug. She squished his cheeks together until he could barely mumble a protest. "I love you, little brother. I wouldn't leave if I didn't believe you could handle it."

His throat tightened. Blinking hard, he whispered back, "Love you too," barely loud enough for her to hear.

Embarrassing, how watery his eyes had gotten. Mr. D always lectured about "feeling your feelings" like it was some big revelation. Luke knew that already. It was just… not easy when those feelings made him look like a kid.

Aubrey sniffled, rubbed at her nose, and whipped her face away, refusing to look at him. Clearing her throat, she said, "Well, we have to go before Latifa chews us out, and she's terrifying when she loses her patience. But is there anything you want us to bring back?"

Luke pretended not to notice her glassy eyes.

*What do I want?*

He chewed on the inside of his cheek, fingers drumming lightly against his thigh as he counted. One, two, three… four.

Four years since he'd really been out in the world. The last time, he'd been on his way to Camp, more focused on surviving than seeing the sights. Sure, there was the winter solstice, but those Olympus trips didn't count—they never even got to see New York properly. He only knew the city through TV screens and secondhand stories from the kids who'd grown up there.

Food was out, too. Mr. D had developed a strange interest in him, which meant their "meetings" usually involved contraband—pizza, burgers, all the things Camp's healthy food policy banned.

Clothes? Boring.

Tech? He could watch TV at the Big House if he really wanted.

"How about a book or… I don't know, an accessory? But do you even have money for that?" Luke muttered, brows knitting as he eyed his sister. After a beat, he sighed. "Forget it. Just surprise me."

Aubrey ruffled his hair again, her voice fond. "Never change, Lukey. I'll see what I can do."

"Time to go," Axel warned, peering out the door with his usual blank expression.

"She's there already?" Aubrey walked over and glanced past his shoulder. She winced. "Damn, she looks pissed. That smile of hers. It's *that* one. You know which one."

Axel nodded solemnly and opened the door to let her pass.

His sister paused, turning back one last time to wink. "Take care of the cabin for me, Lukey. I'm leaving it in your capable hands."

"I'll make sure it's intact when you come back," Luke said, snorting softly.

He followed them to the door but stopped there, watching as they crossed the Camp toward the van. Latifa joined them halfway, her expression clearly annoyed at having been made to wait—unusual for her. Latifa was usually the chill one, but this was her last summer before college. Luke had even heard she'd been training her younger sibling to take her place.

So yeah. He couldn't blame her for being jittery about risking her life right before she got to start a normal one.

The van's lights flickered as it pulled away, moving until it was just a speck. Luke lingered in the doorway long after it vanished down the road, the horizon swallowing them whole.

"Now I'm in charge. Yay, bosshood," he muttered under his breath as he turned back inside.

He stepped carefully over Pipo, who had decided he was done chewing his bone in the corner. "You're too big to be lying in the middle of the room, son," Luke muttered, but Pipo

only lolled his tongue out adorably and stayed right where he was.

Luke rolled his eyes, but smiled.

The pup that had once looked like a fluffy Pomeranian knockoff was long gone. In his place stood an Akita-sized beast, with plenty of growing left to do. For now, Pipo still fit in the cabin. Luke dreaded the day he didn't.

But Pipo wasn't the only one who'd changed. Luke had too.

He was average in height—no matter that Levi kept insisting he was *small* and *soft* as a princess—but the baby fat was gone, replaced by sharper lines. He was glad he hadn't inherited his father's lamppost build (no offense, siblings); his mother's family had clearly won the gene war.

*Thank God* the Brazilian side won out.

Sometimes, when he caught his reflection, he still saw traces of who he used to be. The effect was… weird. Androgynous—male, yeah, but nowhere near the "manly" image Canon Luke seemed desperate to project. Not that Luke wanted that.

He was beautiful. Sue him.

Maybe it was like that book he'd read once—the body reflects the soul or something deep like that.

…Nah. Probably ripped it straight out of Jujutsu Kaisen, which made the whole thought even more questionable.

He shook his head, banishing the narcissistic spiral, and dug through his stuff. A few minutes of rummaging later, his hand landed on the notebook: a cheap Camp Store model, the kind he had (naturally) stolen.

Flipping it open, he scrawled a quick reminder: *find a gift for Aubrey.*

She'd gone out of her way for him, and he wasn't about to let that go unanswered. Problem was, he had no money, and the Camp Store's idea of "gifts" was laughable. So he'd have to make something by hand, like the Incas, Mayas, and Aztecs used to do centuries ago.

The thought almost made him smile.

Then—bang. A knock at the cabin door. Insistent in that annoyingly familiar way.

Luke rolled his eyes skyward, almost giving himself a migraine.

*Of course.*

Sliding the notebook back into its hiding place, he pushed to his feet. Whoever it was had the timing of a particularly inconvenient bug. And Luke didn't need a glass orb to know who it was.

That guy would break the door down if he could.

When Luke swung the door open, sure enough, he was met with Peter Wu's narrowed eyes. The guy stood there stoic as a statue, arms folded like he was posing for a movie poster.

Luke still hadn't figured out whether Wu practiced those poses in the mirror or if it just came naturally.

"Fight me."

"Good afternoon to you too, Peter. I'm doing well, thanks for asking," Luke drawled, arching an eyebrow at him. Wu's expression darkened like a thundercloud.

If Peter wasn't such a boy scout about honor, Luke might've actually been scared. The guy was built like he'd been bench-pressing since birth (not far from the truth—Peter had been insane since he was twelve), and Luke was pretty sure that in a few months he'd have to duck just to pass through doorframes.

"Good afternoon. Now fight me." Wu's jaw clenched so hard the words sounded chewed.

Luke was halfway to reminding the barbarian about manners—just to watch the vein pop in his forehead—when another voice cut in.

"Don't be a coward!"

The declaration cracked through the air, high-pitched and scathing.

Luke blinked. A kid—maybe nine—stood beside Peter, glaring at him like she was about to take his lunch money (which he didn't even have, the tragedy).

She was stocky and tall for her age, Luke thought, reminding him uncomfortably of a younger Peter. Stringy light-brown hair clung in stubborn waves, like it hadn't seen a brush in weeks. Her red-brown eyes, deep-set and furious, carried the feral look of a cornered animal.

Too bad the effect was wasted on her round, still-babyish face.

Luke shot Peter a questioning look.

Peter straightened proudly, one large hand landing on the girl's head like he was presenting a prize horse.

"This is Clarisse La Rue, my new sister. She will be watching us duel."

Wait. *Clarisse?*

His eyes flicked to her again, and the girl almost bared her teeth in response.

Unease prickled down his spine. *Canon characters are already showing up,* he thought faintly, willing his face to stay composed.

He shoved the thought away. Thinking about Annabeth and Thalia right now would only drag him under.

Instead, he focused on Clarisse. She was jittery, scanning the space like she expected a monster to crawl out of the walls, which was pretty normal for fresh arrivals. But then Peter's hand settled on her head again, and she flinched.

That—Luke noted—wasn't normal.

In the books, she'd reacted the same way to Ares, he remembered. But Luke wasn't so sure about that. The war god wasn't exactly anyone's sweetheart, sure, but mythology painted him as the kind who avenged wrongs against his own.

So why would Ares, feasted by women, turn on one of his girls?

Maybe Luke was just overthinking this whole thing.

"I never agreed to this spar," he said at last, voice flat.

Peter's mouth twitched, but Luke cut him off.

"But, since I'm feeling generous…" His eyes slid to Clarisse, whose baby-round face scrunched into a scowl. "…I'll accept your challenge."

He brushed past, unhurried, while the kid bristled like a hound on a chain.

The mutters of "Are you sure? He looks like he'd snap if I poked him," and Peter's calm reply, "He might look weak, but somehow he still wins," nipped at his heels.

Luke ignored them all—the insults, and Peter's accidental ones—and strolled leisurely toward the arena.

By the time they arrived, he was already in rhythm: armor buckled, practice sword in hand, giving it a testing swoop with a practiced flick of his wrist.

He'd gotten good fast—so fast that Chiron had started dropping hints about him stepping in as the new instructor. The last guy hadn't even survived his freshman year of college before a monster gutted him, and the younger campers still needed someone to teach them how not to die.

On paper, it made sense. Luke's necklace beads marked him as a veteran, and he wasn't the youngest around anymore; most were his age or a bit younger. But the thought left him tired. Proto counselor duties already ate enough of his time—and more of his soul than he liked to admit.

With a huff, he adjusted his grip on the sword, added a small flourish, and planted himself in the center of the arena. He waited—patient—as Peter buckled his straps and adjusted his helmet with the stern precision of a general preparing for war.

“Clarisse,” Wu called, marching toward Luke. “Stand back and observe. There’s much to learn from watching. We’ll teach you.”

Luke’s mouth twisted. *We*? Funny, he didn’t remember signing up to train someone else’s brat.

But it was Wu, and he spoke in declarations.

Then the swords rang.

Peter came in hard, every swing looked like it could split Luke in half if it landed. But Luke was quicker, and several times slipperier. He slipped between angles, darting in and out, forcing Peter to grit his teeth Luke refused to be hit.

Steel clashed. Again and again. Sparks flew with each collision. After a volley of probing strikes, both broke apart, circling warily. Sweat stung Luke’s eyes, his chest rising and falling fast as he searched for an opening.

Then he saw it: Peter’s stance leaned right, weight barely brushing his left leg. Luke snorted. *Classic Wu.* Too proud to let the infirmary touch him after Capture the Flag. That pride was a crack Luke could take advantage of.

Because taking a clean hit from Peter was not an option. Guy’s biceps were bigger than Luke’s damn head.

Decision made, Luke surged forward, faster than most eyes could track. Peter lifted his blade to guard, but Luke twisted low, slashing three lightning-quick strikes at the weak leg before Wu could blink.

Then he was gone again, back in stance like he’d never moved at all—except for the ringing echoes of steel and Peter’s narrowed, pained eyes.

To Wu’s credit, he only grunted, holding steady on a leg that clearly wanted to buckle. Which meant Luke could close in.

He darted forward, focused more on landing hits than dodging them. And Peter caught it. He swung for Luke’s gut, the flat side of the blade aimed with precision.

Luke dodged, but not perfectly—the blade smashed across his left arm as it passed. Even a glancing strike was disastrous. The force rattled his bones, made his teeth chatter; for a split second, he swore he heard something crack.

He bit the hiss back and closed the gap, taking advantage of how Peter was overextended and too slow to recover. In the same breath, Luke shoved his sword up under Peter’s chin.

“Dead,” he hissed through clenched teeth.

It was supposed to end there.

But Peter flicked his eyes up to meet his, and the red in them was wild. For a tense moment, Luke thought Peter might still swing, every muscle ready to dodge if he did.

Then Wu blinked, shook his head once, and let his sword clatter to the dirt.

“Good fight,” Peter said, calm again, like some monk after a revelation.

Luke suppressed a relieved sigh. Crisis averted.

Peter was a strange one. Somehow, he was easier to deal with after losing. The boar always came back for more, though he’d complain if he thought Luke was being “dishonorable.” Which, man, Wu was a head taller and built like a truck, so excuse Luke for not volunteering to wrestle him.

And even when Peter did win, he’d stalk off like victory tasted rotten in his mouth, squinting at Luke as if he’d expected better.

“You should get that leg checked,” Luke warned, catching the grimace Peter couldn’t quite mask when he shifted his weight. It had already been banged up, Luke’s attack might’ve nudged it into an actual fracture.

Peter snorted and rolled his ankle in a way that made Luke wince in sympathy, his own arm throbbing. “No. They talk too much. I can’t stand them.”

“And we can’t stand you either,” a familiar voice cut in.

Lee stood beside a sulking Clarisse, her glare ricocheting between him and Luke like she couldn’t decide who deserved it more.

“Lee,” Luke greeted.

“Luke,” Lee echoed with a grin, stepping closer, then frowning when he caught sight of the bruise on Luke’s arm. “Let me check that.”

As Lee’s hands glowed gold over the injury, Ancient Greek spilling from his mouth in a hymn, Luke watched him, his expression souring slightly. The boy was two years younger and already creeping up on his height, his shoulders broadening from archery practice. Give it another year, and Lee would look like a soldier.

Luke, though, was perfectly fine with what he had. He was more dancer than brute, and he preferred it that way.

Still, it grated that Lee would soon be looking down at him. If Fletcher—or anyone—thought that'd make him easier to dismiss, Luke could always remind them.

In the *before*, men had looked down on him too.

“Are you in pain?” Lee’s nervous voice cut in. Amber eyes searched Luke’s face, his hands hovering as if he wanted to touch but didn’t dare.

Luke realized he'd been scowling at nothing. He smoothed his expression into something pleasant and shook his head. "No. It's all good."

Lee studied him a moment longer, then exhaled. "Good. You'll be fine. Just rest that arm for a couple days and it'll be good as new."

He turned to Peter with a grimace, eyes narrowing in that way Luke knew: the silent calculation over whether someone even deserved his healing.

Luke arched an eyebrow. Reluctantly, Lee set to work, nose wrinkling as though Peter stank the whole time.

"Clarisse. Come here," Peter commanded when it was done, not sparing Lee a word of thanks.

Clarisse obeyed eagerly, eyes gleaming with the same glint as her brother's, even though they looked nothing alike.

"What did you learn from the spar?"

The girl scrunched up her face in thought, and Luke had to clench his hands to resist the urge to pinch her cheeks. He already knew how that would end—bitten fingers. He'd hated it as a kid, in both of his childhoods.

Growing up again had dragged back all sorts of strange muscle memories, including that ridiculous surge of aggression at anything too cute.

"To take advantage of a weakness?" she said at last, more question than answer.

Peter frowned. "Are you telling me, or asking me?"

"Telling!" Clarisse huffed, cheeks puffed in indignation. She repeated, louder this time, "To take advantage of a weakness."

"Good. Then tell me why Luke won." Peter crossed his arms.

Clarisse's glare darted straight at Luke, her scowl suggesting her brother losing hadn't exactly raised Luke in her esteem.

"He's quick," she admitted grudgingly. "And he watched you until he saw his chance, then he was on you before I could blink."

Peter nodded, satisfied. Clarisse tried to duck her head, hiding the smile creeping onto her face.

"That's right," Peter said. "He didn't hesitate. Action brings victory, doubt brings defeat."

Who would've thought Peter Wu fancied himself a wise master, doling out fortune-cookie wisdom? Certainly not Luke.

The man pointed his sword at his sister, and Luke's stomach dropped. But instead of striking, Peter barked an order for her to pick a blade.

Luke's relief lasted all of three seconds.

The next moment, Clarisse was skidding across the dirt, Peter on her before she could suck in a breath. He wasn't pulling punches—every smack of his blade sent her stumbling, wide-eyed and gasping. The more her movements faltered, the harder he pressed, drilling the lesson with bruises.

Luke snapped before he'd even thought it through. One step, a blur of steel, and his sword crashed against Peter's.

"Stop!"

A twist of his wrist wrenched the blade from Peter's hands. The older boy scowled, but he did back off. Clarisse scrambled into a corner, Lee hovering with a hand on her shoulder, glaring at Peter like a disapproving school prefect. Clarisse glared right back, teeth bared.

Luke rounded on Peter, fury burning in his throat. "This is teaching? Thrashing a kid until she can't breathe? That's your idea of training?"

Peter's brows knit, genuine confusion flickering across his face. "This is the way of Cabin Five."

"Look at her!" Luke jabbed a finger toward Clarisse. "Do you think she learned anything?"

Peter glanced over. Clarisse, face pink, immediately snapped, "I don't need to be babied! I can handle it!"

"She can handle it," Peter repeated, nodding solemnly, as if that settled the matter.

Luke felt like he was about to have an aneurysm. What was it with these Ares kids and their masochism?

Pinching the bridge of his nose, he accepted the inevitable: reasoning with them was useless. *There goes my free time.* He fixed Peter with a glare and said, tone sharp enough to cut, "Call me every time you train with her. I'll teach her too. I'm not letting you traumatize the girl any further, you *swine*."

Peter lit up like someone had handed him a medal. He even bowed, eyes shining with a zeal that made Luke's stomach sink.

Great. He'd just signed himself up for hellish afternoons.

For free.

"Are we going to continue my training?" Clarisse cut in, chin high.

Luke had already clocked the pattern: she hid her hesitance behind anger.

“Yes. But first, correct stances. Then, and only then, with me around, will there be sparring.” He declared it before Peter could bark another order.

“Sorry to interrupt, Luke,” Lee said carefully, pointing across the arena, “but isn’t that your brother?”

Luke’s blood pressure spiked on instinct.

“Which one?” he snapped, almost spinning in place.

Lee squinted, then nodded toward a gawky figure lurking near the edge.

“The new guy,” he said. “The one who…” his eyes gleamed with mirth “…‘borrowed’ that book from Cabin Six.”

David.

Good. David was the easiest to deal with.

Luke shot Peter one last glare. “Don’t start anything until I get back.”

Luke marched over to where his brother was half-hiding behind a weapons rack, sneaking glances like a spy in training. When Luke reached him, David tilted his chin up with a pitiful expression, widening those blue eyes until they practically glistened.

Dean had found him four years ago, but he’d only come to Camp this summer, after turning twelve. People said he looked like Luke, but Luke knew better. David was Jack’s clone: olive skin, brown hair, that disarming smile. The only difference was the eyes—Jack’s green traded for David’s guileless blue.

“What is it, David?” Luke asked, gentling his tone as he leaned down.

David sniffed delicately. “Big bro… the Cabin Six kids are picking on me again.” He blinked twice for effect, then added with a sigh, “They still won’t stop blaming me for that book thing…”

Luke’s jaw tightened, Ryan’s pompous face flashing through his mind.

“Don’t mind them. I’ll handle it.” He was already plotting how to use his substitute counselor powers to make the little antichrist regret it—even though he knew David had started it. “Come on. I’m teaching some sword work you’ve been begging me to show you.”

“Really?” David’s eyes lit up before flicking toward the Ares kids, a flicker of real hesitance making him freeze. “But… I don’t want to intrude. They already don’t like me.”

Luke snorted, tugging his brother forward anyway. “You’re my brother. If anyone’s intruding, it’s those brutes.”

Coaching away David’s insecurities was still a work in progress, but Luke didn’t mind.

Back at the group, Luke fixed his stare on Peter, daring him to complain. Wu stayed silent—whether out of indifference or tunnel-vision focus on fighting him.

*How simple-minded,* Luke thought, almost approvingly.

Clarisse didn't speak either, but her scowl said plenty about sharing her "private" lessons.

"Flexibility routine first," Luke commanded, sliding into the motions with ease. "And before you protest, little battle junkie, it prevents injuries and makes you fight better."

To his surprise, not just David and Clarisse copied him. Peter and even Lee fell into step. Though only David managed anything close to fluidity, mirroring Luke's stances naturally. The Ares kids looked like they were carved from wood, and poor Lee… well, his limbs seemed to be on different pages entirely.

Not shocking. Hermes' kids were built for speed and agility.

Soon Luke was circling, nudging shoulders, adjusting grips, knocking feet into proper alignment. And to his own irritation, he realized he didn't hate it. Maybe he even had a knack for this.

Maybe the whole counselor thing wouldn't be the disaster he'd feared.

Chapter End Notes

Luke has officialy upgraded from little brother to big brother. Is he ready for the counselor duties? Well, he is trying. And yes, Luke is pretty. I had this image of elf Senshi from Delicious in Dungeon while doing this, but I also imagined Luke having kind of a deep voice, kinda like all the testosterone went to his vocal cords instead, lol.

Dyonisus being a therapist is related to his epithets as well, Soterius. Greek gods, in general, had opposite domains and such. As I wrote, I realized Dio had a lot of epithets that were kind impactful to Luke in some way. So yeah, Dio is worming his way in as some kind of second godly father or something.

About Ares, it's an actual thing. In Greek myths, he is a pretty decent dad to his daughters, being one of the primary deities worshipped by the Amazons, as well as being their father. Ares Gynaikothoinas or 'feasted by women' title originated in Arkadia. The men were losing the war, and the women decided they had to do something, so they went and kicked the Spartans out, as a result they started to do only-women festivals in honor of Ares.

So, Clarisse. In my head, the thing of her being afraid of her father was not explored. Why is she afraid? She is a year-rounder too, did she have a bad homelife? And the

thing of Ares kid being bullies and Aphrodite children being so shallow is kind of a superficial interpretation in my view, so I'm changing it. Obviously, there will be some bad apples, people are people in the end, but the whole of the cabin being like that? No.

Anyways, thanks for reading! What did you think of these little changes I'm trying to incorporate?

# Chapter 13: Teenhood - In the Quiet

Chapter Notes

> Luke politicking, hearing horrible, obscure news and being weak to cute things, with a sprinkle of a mention of nymphs running away from gods as per canon. We all know what happens to nymphs in Greek mythology.
>
> **Edited**

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After adding the last few touches, Luke leaned back and eyed his work with a mix of exhaustion and pride.

The gift for Aubrey had eaten up more nights than he wanted to count, especially since free afternoons had been scarce ever since he'd thrown himself to the Ares kids as a training dummy. They multiplied like gremlins whenever he showed up with Peter and Clarisse. At least his little brother still had the guts to come along.

But now, finally, a week of scribbling and sketching had paid off. His monster compendium —every page hand-written, every illustration his own—was finished.

He hoped Aubrey would like it as much as he wanted her to.

Luke stood, stretched, and went in search of wrapping paper worthy of the project. At the Arts & Crafts Center, he flipped through patterned sheets, weighing one design against another. The sharp crack of the door opening broke the quiet. He didn't look up—it was probably just some kid wandering in. Still, it was odd for one of the brats to show up at this hour; they usually preferred tearing around like hooligans to appreciating the quiet.

Whatever. The gift came first.

The newcomer clearly didn't share that priority; a deliberate cough sliced through the quiet.

He almost let his head fall into his hands.

*Dear Lord, not Peter. Please, not Peter.*

Luke turned, schooling his expression into a pleasant mask, lips curved just enough to hide the irritation simmering beneath. The mask shattered the moment he saw who stood there.

*Ryan*.

They stared each other down in silence, as if speaking first would mean defeat. Ryan's glare was sharp as glass, his usual composure cracked into something openly hostile—a rare sight from a guy who paraded his self-control like it was proof of divine pedigree.

Really, he was just a pompous asshole. A *smart* pompous asshole, which was worse.

Why else corner Luke now, when both of them knew the place was practically deserted?

Luke rolled his eyes and decided he wasn't about to waste time in a contest of wills. Humming, very deliberately, he turned his back and let his hands drift over the stacks of paper. Green… not his sister's color. What about purple—ah, this one. His fingers paused on a roll of royal-blue wrapping paper patterned with hawks poised mid-attack.

Perfect.

He pivoted back to his chair, pretending Ryan was just part of the furniture, though even that felt too kind. "Obsessor spirit" might've been more accurate, considering how Ryan always managed to tail him, ready to argue about anything whenever Luke was in charge. Not that he didn't do the same with Aubrey.

Really, the compendium deserved better attention than Ryan's posturing. Maybe it would bring bad luck or something.

As he smoothed the paper flat, he side-eyed Ryan and began to hum under his breath, "Bloquear a tua cara é hoje o meu maior desejo~"*

The guy made a face like he'd sucked on a lemon, probably sensing that Luke wasn't complimenting him on that stupid slicked-back hair he insisted on, but having no way to prove it.

*Heh. Take that, plague of Egypt.*

Ryan's sigh broke the relative peace. Of course he wouldn't slam his hand on the table—that would be beneath him. Instead, he gave a prim little tap, a silent command to look up. Clearly, he thought himself too dignified to break his mask, even when Luke knew he wanted to.

Out of principle, he didn't want to obey, but Luke looked up anyway, slow, batting his eyelashes for good measure. The flush that hit Ryan's face was worth it. He recovered quickly, though, forcing his features back into that unimpressed counselor look.

Luke stared.

Ryan stared back.

But even the Antichrist had limits, it seemed. Finally, he gave in.

"Castellan," he said, voice clipped, "what's this I hear about the stolen books incident being reduced to an *'unfortunate misunderstanding'*?"

Luke spun his pencil, tone dripping with boredom. “Exactly what you heard.” Then, with a glance through his lashes, he threw Ryan’s words back at him, “Just an *unfortunate misunderstanding*.”

Ryan snorted. “You and I both know this was no mere incident. I don’t appreciate you meddling in Cabin Six’s affairs.”

“Meddling?” Luke sighed, propping his cheek against his palm like he might doze off mid-sentence. “I wouldn’t dream of it.” He let a lock of hair slip through his fingers, twirling it idly as his lashes flicked up with feigned surprise. “Though… why come all this way when it’s practically empty? Surely not just to see me.” He half-covered his smile with his hand, voice lilting in mock astonishment. “What other reason could you *possibly* have to corner me alone?”

“I know what you’re up to, brat,” Ryan snapped, folding his arms with a scowl. “Quit playing. It won’t work. You’re the one spreading false rumors, and the only reason you’d risk that is to protect someone.” He leaned down, gray eyes cutting into him. “Someone close to you.”

And that, exactly, was why Luke hated his siblings getting mixed up with Cabin Six. Athena’s brood unraveled things too quickly for anyone’s liking.

“Such harsh accusations,” Luke murmured, smoothing the wrapping paper flat like it was infinitely more interesting. His tone was light, a veil of indifference. “Tell me, what makes you so sure of these… conclusions?”

Athena kids, Luke had noticed, weren’t so different from their bloodthirsty rivals in Cabin Five. Ares’ kids swung fists. Athena’s played games. Both craved the same thing—victory, at any cost.

In the end, war was war.

Ryan’s gray eyes sharpened, glinting like blades about to cut through Luke’s pretty façade—and his narrative with it.

“One of our books disappeared,” Ryan said, his voice like a chisel. He began to pace in front of Luke’s table, equal parts professor awaiting confession and predator testing his prey. “Right after you and that Cabin Seven brat tried to access our library. A few days later, one of our most prized volumes on godly history vanished.”

Luke only hummed, unbothered, twirling another strand of hair as though the accusation were wind. “How… *tragic*. But you’re only dealing in conjecture, Ryan. Nothing concrete. Just coincidences.”

“Perhaps.” Ryan conceded, though the glint in his eyes said he wasn’t finished. “Still, my siblings have noticed you telling anyone who’ll listen that the whole matter was nothing more than… an incident.” His mouth curved into a smug half-smile. “Suspicious, don’t you think?”

“Only if I’d gone out of my way to spread it.” Luke replied lightly, meeting his gaze without blinking. “As you’re aware, I’m acting counselor in Aubrey’s absence. Any issue concerning my cabin lands on my desk. That’s protocol.”

*Did you really think I’d stumble over a trick that cheap? That I’d panic and confess? How disappointing.* Luke rested his chin delicately in his palm.

Athena kids always assumed they were the smartest in the room. But Hermes’ children weren’t idiots, either. Their father was god of language and learning as much as of thieves, though people preferred to remember the story of him stealing Apollo’s cattle.

That reputation meant most expected his children to be pickpockets. And many were.

Still, Luke often wondered how much of that came from divine inheritance, and how much was just expectation—and the Mist filling in the blanks. He liked to believe he was his own person first. But if Hermes’ domains gave him a few advantages? He wasn’t about to turn them down.

“Indeed.” Ryan’s brows pulled together, his voice sharpened as he pressed on. “Yet you’ve conducted no investigation. Or if you have, you’ve failed to inform us of your findings. As the affected party, we expect full disclosure.” His gray eyes hardened. “We want our property back.”

“Do you not think you’re being unfair, *counselor*?” Luke asked sweetly, the title lingering just long enough to sting. “To accuse Cabin Eleven without a shred of proof… unless we’re counting your biases. Or, if we’re bold, your prejudices.”

The slight twitch of Ryan’s lips betrayed his discomfort before he buried it. Luke knew he’d brush the angle aside soon enough—Camp Half-Blood didn’t like staring stereotypes in the face—but for now, the seed was planted.

That was enough.

“If you offered your help, we could be certain your cabin wasn’t involved.” Ryan recovered swiftly, his fingers drumming against his arm. His voice became sly. “Don’t you want to show the world that Cabin Eleven’s demigods are more than just thieves?”

Luke tilted his head, pretending to mull it over. Emotional manipulation. Clever, but sloppy compared to Aphrodite’s hyenas. He’d had enough practice being their favorite obsession to spot the tactic a mile away.

Finally, he echoed Ryan’s earlier barb with a faint smile. “Didn’t you just say you didn’t appreciate me meddling in Cabin Six’s affairs? Inaccurate as that assumption was.”

“True, I did.” Ryan’s tone cooled, eyes calculating and cutting as steel. “You’re smart, Castellan. I’ll give you that. But for the sake of both our cabins, let’s settle this quietly.”

There it was. The threat, folded neatly inside courtesy.

*Asshole*.

Luke didn't like how easily Ryan dismissed it, as if Cabin Eleven were nothing more than an inconvenience. Maybe he didn't realize how close Luke was to the boars. His hand clenched; for a moment, he pictured smashing that smug face in, but he smiled instead. He wasn't about to drag his siblings into this mess, not when keeping the peace inside Cabin Eleven already felt like holding back a riot with his bare hands. Adding an external conflict on top of that? Impossible.

He swore, irritated, that he wouldn't entertain an alliance with Cabin Six anytime soon. No—better to steer his cabin toward Cabin Five in the next Capture the Flag match. He had enough sway to make that happen.

"A wise solution, as expected from a son of the goddess of wisdom," Luke said at last, his doll-like smile fixed in place. Ryan, of course, preened in smug victory, his gray gaze gleaming like molten steel softened in a forge. "I'll find your missing book for you."

"Missing, huh?" Ryan snorted, already turning on his heel. "Make sure it's returned before the next Capture the Flag."

And just like that, he marched off without so much as a farewell. Rude as Peter, really—though Ryan at least dressed his lack of manners better than his Ares cousin ever tried to.

Luke let himself collapse back into his chair, head tipping up, a long sigh dragging out of him.

Ryan's guesses had been too close for comfort. The book *was* in Luke's possession—thanks to his little brother. Entirely David's doing, mind you.

He and Lee had gone sniffing around Cabin Six for information on the gods. For Luke, it was about the Fates; for Lee, it was about peeling back the shine of Olympus. The kid had practically stopped speaking for a whole day after Luke told him what Apollo was really like.

But Athena's children guarded their library like it was sacred scripture. No outsiders allowed—a policy that smelled a lot like bigotry to Luke.

Somehow, David caught wind of it. And then, against all odds, pulled it off. A theft right under their noses.

There was no way out of this without stirring trouble. As much as Luke wanted to be petty—just to prove a point—he couldn't. Acting counselor meant responsibility, which meant swallowing the urge and preparing to return David's heist prize.

He sighed and pushed himself up. Padding to the tables farther inside, he let his hands drift over the scraps and tools scattered across their surface, lingering as if they might spark inspiration, anything to shoo away the irritation thudding against his cool.

*That smug little devil's intern—*

The door creaked. *Tap, tap, tap.* Footsteps.

Luke shut his eyes, frustration spiking. "Ryan, what else do you—"

He stopped mid-sentence.

Not Ryan.

Abigail.

His sister framed in the doorway like a queen arriving late to court, arms cradling her usual collection of oddities—tarot cards, smooth pebbles, a birding guide, and, disturbingly, a book on animal guts. Her expression hadn't changed since the day she'd learned to scowl: slightly vexed, as though her brothers were a permanent inconvenience.

At her heel, Pipo paced, fur bristling.

With imperious calm, Abigail lifted a finger toward the chair Luke had just vacated. "Sit."

Luke crossed his arms, one brow rising. "If you ask nicely," he said, voice sugar-sweet, "I might even think about it."

Her scowl deepened. She opened her mouth to retort, then paused and snapped it shut, grumbling under her breath as her glare grew darker. Luke wondered if she'd have the wrinkles of an old woman by eighteen. But she didn't bother with words.

She swept past him instead, slamming her shoulder into his. Luke tugged her hair in retaliation, earning himself a sharp yank back that made a high, startled shriek escape his lips.

"Ah—!"

She snorted while he glared, massaging his scalp. Then she dropped her strange assortment onto the table. Pebbles rattled, cards slid, and a book on animal guts landed with a heavy thud.

The scrape of wood on tile made Luke wince as Abigail dragged a chair into place and sat. Slowly, she spread her tarot cards, then lifted her purplish-blue eyes to him.

Those eyes weren't like anyone else's in their family—strange and unsettling. And here, in the quiet of the Arts & Crafts Center, with only Pipo pacing nearby, she seemed almost… mystical.

Not that Luke would ever say it out loud. Better to call her *weird*; that might prevent her ego from getting any worse.

"Sit," she repeated.

Luke obeyed—but only after making a show of it. He sauntered back to the chair, every step dripping with how voluntary this was. Dropping into the seat, he propped his cheek against his palm and let boredom seep into his voice.

"Well? What's this about? I've got better things to do than humor your hobbies."

Abigail gave a disdainful little sniff, but—uncharacteristically—she didn't have a retort.

Luke's brows furrowed. *No "shut up, you little shit"?* That was odd.

She shuffled in silence, cards snapping sharp in her hands, then cut the deck into three neat piles. Past. Present. Future.

Luke recognized the setup instantly—he'd sat through this routine too many times. He slouched lower, gaze drifting away, though his eyes still tracked her hands from the corner of his vision.

And when she turned the first card, he leaned forward despite himself.

"Past. The Chariot. Upright." Her voice was calm, even. She held the card up for him to see.

Luke turned his head slightly, cheek squished as he glanced at it with feigned disinterest, then frowned.

He knew that one. *Willpower.*

"Present. The Hanged Man. Upright." Her tone dropped lower.

*Martyrdom.*

"Future. Ace of Swords. Reversed." Abigail's voice went soft, almost mournful, as she laid down the last card.

*Brutality.*

For a long moment he just stared at the spread, then lifted his gaze to hers, a furrow digging between his brows. He wet his lips before forcing the question out, low and uneasy.

"…What did you ask about?"

"Nothing." Her reply was immediate, but her eyes were haunted. "I've been pulling the same cards for days now. No matter what I ask."

"It's just cards, Abigail. None of this is real, remember? Your predictions have never come true." Luke kept his tone light, though he wasn't sure if he was trying to calm her—or himself.

For a flicker of a moment, his thoughts slipped back to Book Luke, and to those twisted visions on Olympus.

His stomach tightened.

Pipo chose that exact moment to howl. The sound tore through the quiet, making both of them jump.

"You don't understand." Her frustration cracked through as she ran both hands through her dark waves. "I've been… off. Like something's going to happen." A pause. Her voice dropped lower. "No. Like it already did."

Luke's gaze followed Pipo as he paced the room, claws clicking against the floor. Some part of him connected the dog's restlessness with Abigail's unease, but the tension in his chest was knotted too tight to untangle the thought.

"Well… what do you want me to do?" he asked finally. If she'd sought him out, it had to mean something. Though Lord knew, he doubted he'd be much help.

"You can't." Abigail's answer came flat, unsettled, as she gathered her odd collection back into her arms. "I just…" she muttered, biting her lip as she stared at him through narrowed eyes, fingers tapping against the book's cover. "I wanted you to know."

"Thank you…?" Luke tried, the word awkward on his tongue. His mind spun, scrambling to make sense of this situation, but the confusion etched across her face told him she didn't have the answers either.

"Shut up." She snapped suddenly, turning to glare at him, her mask of irritation snapping neatly back into place. Dramatically shivering, she added, "It feels wrong hearing polite words out of my bratty little brother's mouth."

Luke huffed, rolling his eyes. "Ah, abestada, agora deu.* Nobody here is stranger than you, you second-rate prototype of a fortune teller."

Abigail's face went scarlet. "You! You—you know what?" She shot to her feet, words tangling, and then snarled, "You don't even deserve a comeback!" before storming off.

*You're only saying that because you couldn't think of one,* Luke thought, amused, watching the door slam behind her.

Beside him, Pipo tilted his head, ears perked.

"What a strange person, isn't she?" Luke muttered to the dog.

Deciding he wasn't about to waste the rest of the day cooped up, he tucked Aubrey's gift under one arm and whistled for Pipo. The dog bounded ahead, darting circles around him as Luke wandered aimlessly.

The air was peaceful, warm sun slipping through shifting branches. But his mind churned. Whatever Abigail's cards meant—if they meant anything at all—they hadn't left him. Paired with the hushed whispers that seemed to follow him around Camp, it felt like the beginning of something *bad*.

His stomach knotted. Powerless—that's what he was. The world kept sliding toward the events of the books, as if his presence here meant nothing.

He shook his head sharply, as if the motion could scatter the thoughts.

By the time he came back to himself, he'd drifted near the forest, the stretch where his racing lessons usually took place. He paused, staring at the empty expanse, and felt it: that prickling sense of being watched.

Luke kept his eyes forward, resisting the urge to turn, but in the corner of his vision he caught flickers—trees shimmering, glimpses of hands, heads half-hidden in the leaves. The dryads.

But they didn't come to greet him.

The younger ones normally did, eager chatter spilling out in stories and gossip. Not today. And the older nymphs had long since stopped seeking him out. It had started subtly as he grew older. He hadn't thought much of it at first. But the day he'd outrun both campers and dryads alike—beating even the older ones—that was when things had truly changed.

Instructor Holly had brushed it off, calling the dryads "temperamental." But Luke knew better.

He'd seen the looks. And he understood, really.

He only wished they'd see him for himself. It wasn't like he looked that much like his father anyway. Hermes was tall, bronze-skinned, black-haired—at least from the brief glimpses Luke had caught on Olympus, and from Axel's words too; he swore Aubrey had inherited most of those features.

Luke, meanwhile, was of average height, pale-skinned, a little pink, and blonde.

No, the problem was that he was fast.

Faster than the dryads were comfortable admitting a mortal boy could be.

At least they didn't mistreat him. They just avoided him, parting around him like he carried something contagious.

"Little bird. Fancy seeing you here."

Luke startled at the voice, turning to see Dean, with Grover trailing at his side. Both of them eyed Pipo warily, though it was more annoyance than fear at this point. Everyone was used to the dog by now, and besides, he wasn't full-grown yet.

"And… the hellhound."

Dean had once joked it was only a matter of time. *Hellhounds don't stay small, Luke. Enjoy it while it lasts.*

The thought of his son getting that big still felt strange. He wiggled his fingers, and Pipo wiggled his fluffy butt in return, earning a smile.

"His name is Pipo, the Dangerous. Respect my son, goat," Luke shot back, nudging Pipo's snout playfully.

"Dangerous," Dean snorted.

Luke ignored him. Pointedly.

“Oxe malia, meu filho, tão bonitinho, né? Cachorro do meu abuso*—who’s the menace that bit Levi? You? Yeah, you! Good boy,” he cooed, and Pipo immediately went wild with excitement, wiggling so hard he looked more worm than dog.

Luke laughed before turning his attention back to the satyrs in front of him.

Dean rolled his eyes, while Grover’s expression held a strange sort of solemnity, even as he watched Pipo, wide-eyed. Neither had changed much; nature spirits aged slowly. Grover looked a little older now, closer to twelve, while Dean looked exactly the same.

“So, what are you guys up to?” Luke asked, patting their arms in greeting.

“Visiting my mother.” Dean’s expression soured, and Luke didn’t need clarification.

Instructor Holly. That already explained everything.

“Ah,” he said sympathetically. “Still trying to keep you here?”

Dean grimaced, then sighed. “Forget that. Have you heard the latest gossip? About the King’s demands?”

“I’ve heard bits and pieces,” Luke admitted. “Something big’s brewing, but no one seems to know what.”

“The King is calling satyrs to find a girl and bring her to Camp.” Dean’s tone was flat, but his eyes were troubled. He leaned closer, dropping his voice to a whisper. “His daughter.”

*Thalia*.

The name slammed into Luke like a fist to the gut. His breath caught. Dread crawled icy fingers down his spine.

“That’s…” He faltered, words slipping away.

“A breach of the Pact,” Dean finished for him, weary. “My mother doesn’t want me leaving Camp. Says it’s too dangerous. A Big Three kid, and a broken oath—it’s bad news all around.”

“But it could mean getting a Searcher license sooner!” Grover piped up, eyes bright with excitement—and stubbornness.

Luke shot Dean a glance; Dean shot it right back.

“Is that even allowed?” Luke asked, wary. “Isn’t he too young?”

“Normally, yes,” Dean said, rubbing at his forehead. “But the King isn’t satisfied with our numbers. He’s pushing to send the younger ones too.”

Grover, clearly, was determined. “This is my chance! If I bring back the King’s daughter, I could earn my license!”

Dean exhaled hard, like he'd been through this same argument a dozen times already. "Grover, it's dangerous. You've barely started as a Protector; you've only gone on missions with a senior by your side. And now you're talking about finding and retrieving the demigod who attracts the *most* monsters? Alone?"

"I can do it," Grover said quickly. But his wavering tone, the flicker of doubt in his eyes, betrayed him.

"No one's saying you can't." Dean softened, placing a hand on his friend's shoulder. "But you've got time, Grover. There's no need to rush. Your safety comes first."

"Wouldn't it be smarter to get more experience first? Before throwing yourself into life-or-death quests?" Luke suggested, the words coming out more half-hearted than he meant. Dean gave him a subtle thumbs-up anyway.

Luke already knew how this would play out. Grover would make it back alive—mostly intact, but not unscarred. And not with the one he was meant to save. With Zeus commanding every satyr to search for Thalia, there was no stopping it.

Grover's big brown eyes snapped to him, full of betrayal. Luke's gut twisted.

"But you told me once," Grover said quietly, "to sink my teeth into what I want and not let go."

Oh, come on. That was illegal. Luke was defenseless against puppy-dog eyes—or in this case, baby-goat eyes.

"Well… if you're absolutely sure," he backpedaled, watching Grover brighten instantly. Dean gaped at him like he'd just handed Grover a sword. Luke only shrugged, palms up in surrender.

*What can I do?*

Seeing protests were useless, Dean changed tactics. "At least take an older Protector with you."

Grover shook his head, that same flicker of determination hardening his gaze. "I need to do this alone."

Luke sighed. "Well, one thing's for sure: when the King gives an order, no satyr gets to say no." He threw Dean an apologetic look; Dean answered with a weary nod. Turning back to Grover, Luke added, "But that doesn't mean you can't have some backup."

Grover grimaced. "If I let someone help, they'll say I don't deserve the license. That it wasn't really me."

"Which wouldn't be true," Luke said clumsily, shooting Dean a look that begged for backup.

"Grover, you're still too young," Dean said instead, his brow furrowed in worry.

Oh, well. Not the kind of intervention Luke had hoped for.

He knew it was pointless anyway. Grover's mind was set, and pushing harder would only drive him away. And what did Luke really know about satyr business? He was just a demigod.

"Stay here," Dean urged, voice softer now. "Or at least let yourself be stationed somewhere safe, away from the monster trails. Don't chase after that girl—it's far too dangerous."

"I'm going," Grover snapped. "Uncle Ferdinand and my dad both became Searchers. This is my dream."

"Both of them were much older than you are now."

"But I need to start young if I'm going to find Lord of the Wild!"

"Lord Pan is dead!" Dean shouted.

The words hit the air like a thunderclap.

Grover froze, eyes going wide. Then they welled with tears.

"He's not! You're lying!" His voice cracked as he screamed it, then he turned and bolted, hooves pounding against the dirt.

Neither of them chased him. Dean stood stunned, guilt carved into his face, while Luke hovered uselessly, caught between them.

"Well." Luke cleared his throat, breaking the heavy silence. "I guess… there's not much we can do now."

"I—" Dean started, then broke off, dragging a hand over his face. He looked older than usual, worn down. "He's been like this for days, ever since the order came. He doesn't understand the risks."

"It's his dream," Luke admitted, sighing. "I don't think he cares."

Dean let out a humorless scoff. "Dreams. We've chased after dreams for far too long."

Luke frowned, waiting for him to continue.

"It's too dangerous," Dean muttered, eyes distant. "He's too inexperienced. I can't… I don't want it to happen again."

"What?" The word slipped out of Luke before he could stop it.

Dean's gaze snapped to him, startled, then dropped away. "I'm sorry, Luke. I have to find him. We'll talk later."

And with that, he sprinted after Grover, vanishing into the trees.

Silence settled.

Luke stood there, alone in the grove, Pipo pressed close against his leg. From the shadows, he felt the weight of dryad eyes watching him.

He exhaled sharply. *What a day.*

What a tremendous, *shitty* day.

Chapter End Notes

*Bloquear a tua cara é hoje o meu maior desejo~ = Blocking your face is my greatest wish today
*Ah, abestada, agora deu = Oh, you dumbass, now you've done it
*Oxe malia, meu filho, tão bonitinho, né? Cachorro do meu abuso = Oh wow, my little rascal, my son, so cute, huh? Dog of my annoyance

Athena kids gatekeeping knowledge is a thing I thought made a lot of sense, add that with how Hermes kids have the reputation of being nothing more than thieves, and relations would be tense at best. The war thing is something that came to mind as well, Ares' children are show to be kinda maniacal and agressive, but, in my head, Athena's also have their moments, that love to debate or simply quarrel. That's why David getting the book was a big deal, almost legendary.

Abigail inherited something else different from her siblings. Also, it's a funny thing to imagine this girl with hippie, mystical interests be so short-tempered. Luke being the annoying little shit that he is, always takes advantage of it.

At last, Grover is being sent to the wild, young and inexperienced as he is, to go on his journey to find Thalia. Yes, it's finally happening, soon there will be The Event. Well, Dean has some disagreeing views on that plan, or the satyr's stuff in general, which may be seen as sacrilegious, but he's a good guy and is only worried. A very practical satyr, that Dean is. And Luke is awakening his maternal insticts, soon there will be no escape...

Thank you all for reading! I love to hear your thoughts! ♥♥♥

# Chapter 14: Teenhood - Sorrow

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Everything was dark. Shadows extended well beyond Luke's line of sight, and smoke rose from the ground—or at least what he assumed was the ground. However, when he glanced down, it appeared as if he was floating in the middle of nothing.

Everywhere he looked, he saw nothing but black—a pure, jet-black so profound it seemed almost alive, like a colossal, lethargic beast solely focused on devouring anything that ventured too close, greedily absorbing every hint of light like a ravenous creature.

Suddenly, the surroundings changed, the oppressive void twisting and contorting in ways that made Luke's mind pull and retract in a futile struggle to comprehend what he was witnessing. It left him feeling dizzy and less real, as if in a dream. Strangely, he did not panic; instead, he felt calm, experiencing an artificial kind of tranquility that made his limbs heavy and his mind sluggish.

Bit by bit, the scenery became clearer. Luke found himself in an abandoned warehouse, filled with thousands of boxes stacked neatly on shelves, one above the other until it reached the ceiling, forgotten after who knows how long.

In the middle of the corridor, flanked on both sides by tall shelves, were two figures: one lying down, almost entirely covered by a thick fabric, and the other sitting nearby, hunched over. Luke squinted, trying to make out details, but it was difficult to focus. It left him frustrated, as if he were trying to grasp something that kept slipping away, like watching something obscured behind a veil.

The sitting figure startled before turning to face Luke. He felt like he should have recognized them, but the person's face was blurry, a mix of white and red that made Luke feel dizzy. Desperately gesturing, the figure's mouth moved as if speaking, yet no words reached his ears. Anxious for some unknown reason, he tried to signal that he couldn't hear, but the person persisted, their gestures growing more and more frantic.

Suddenly, the world around them trembled, folding in on itself as walls and shelves melted and turned into wisps of smoke. Luke attempted to sprint toward the two figures, but his feet remained rooted to the ground. Frantically, he struggled to move, even contemplating tearing himself free by cutting off his limbs. He knew he had to hear the message of the strange yet familiar figure, had to reach them, or else he would regret it for the rest of his life. Strangely, the other person didn't budge, seated motionless with a posture that seemed resigned, the familiar—*oh so familiar, why couldn't he remember?*—and ruined face staring at Luke with a sad and mournful gaze.

At that moment, the ground opened under his feet and Luke fell.

He lost track of time as he plunged through the shadows. Flashes darted in his periphery, accompanied by fluttering noises and occasional giggles. It felt like being caught in a storm, a dark storm, with unknown *things* taunting him from the unseen corners, and he was at its core, falling towards an abyss of utter darkness.

And then the darkness blinked.

Luke's blood froze in his veins, the artificial drowsiness evaporating from his body as he stared at the slowly opening golden eye fixed on him.

*Do not blame my son, mortal,* echoed a husky, soothing male voice from all around him, gradually growing fainter as everything swirled before his eyes.

Luke jolted awake, breathing heavily as he scanned his surroundings. It was still early; faint rays of sunshine filtered through the curtains, casting a gentle glow on his sleeping roommates. Pipo, his dog, was the only other creature awake in the room, staring at him with a knowing gaze. Or maybe he was simply projecting his own unease onto the hellhound.

Leaning back, Luke flopped onto his bed and threw an arm over his eyes, trying to make sense of what had just happened. He knew he had dreamed, but he rarely ever dreamed, and this one felt different. The oppressive darkness, the blurry figures, the way everything shifted —it was unlike any dream he'd ever had. And then there was that *thing*.

The only clear thing he had seen in his sleep was an enormous golden eye. He was certain it belonged to something *other*, likely a god, but why speak to Luke?

He had a very bad feeling about all of this. Abigail had been out of sorts since yesterday, growing more unsettled as the day went on. Even more strangely, Pipo's behavior mirrored hers, as if they both sensed a shift in the air that Luke couldn't detect.

But Luke knew something *big* was about to happen. The mobilization of satyrs to search for Thalia was a clear sign. Soon, he would be dealing with problems far larger than a cabin riot.

Big Three children. Titans. Kronos. Children going to war, killing each other, divided and manipulated by forces they couldn't even comprehend.

All of this would unfold in just a few years, and Luke felt completely unprepared. His research on gods and fate proved useless; it only recounted their *great* deeds and the unchangeable nature of things, which offered him no escape from fate—something he refused to bow to, contrary to what these books suggested he do. Moreover, not all faiths held the same belief in destiny; Luke himself believed in free will. Unfortunately, information on other pantheons he knew existed—such as the Romans, Egyptians, and Norse—was scarce. There was even less research into the mechanics of their workings.

With a heavy sigh, Luke sat up and rested his head in his hands. He couldn't fall back asleep; his mind was too agitated with worries to relax. At least, the brightening sunrays in the room suggested it was already time to wake up.

Standing up, Luke stretched and began to walk around the room, gently rousing people from their slumber. Aubrey's preferred method involved a loud shout to startle everyone awake, claiming it saved time, but Luke wasn't the kind of guy who did that.

Soon enough, he guided them all to breakfast and then to their first activities of the day, leaving his dog behind. Which was especially difficult today, for some reason.

He moved through everything on autopilot, his mind distant, as if he were still in that warehouse or perhaps plunging through the smoky storm. He wasn't the only one. Abigail kept glancing at the horizon, as if she could actually see the magical barrier's limits, and perhaps even beyond.

It made his hair stand on end; something was about to happen. The feeling was in the air, affecting everyone, even if they weren't aware of it. The children were a little less cheerful, and the older kids were moodier and on edge. This was particularly apparent during the archery lessons, where concentration was crucial to avoid misfires.

As usual, Cabin Eleven shared their lessons with Cabin Seven, but today everyone's performance seemed to have declined overnight.

Nocking an arrow, Luke drew the bow and released it. Since he was so distracted, the arrow flew erratically, like a drunk bee, and lodged itself right next to Levi's head. The older demigod went very still and quiet, slowly turning his head to stare at the projectile that had nearly pierced his forehead.

It wasn't Luke's fault that the other boy thought it was a brilliant idea to impress the Apollo girls by standing right in front of a target while trying to talk to them. No one could blame Luke for the mishap, even though that specific target was several meters away from his own.

The two girls giggled mockingly as they took the opportunity to scatter. Luke could empathize with the sentiment; if he were in their shoes, being flirted with by Levi of all people, he would wish that the arrow had gone through the brown-haired man's head as well —or, less dramatically, to be as far away from him as possible.

Levi watched them depart with a desolate expression, then turned to the blonde with a furious look and began marching towards him.

"Having no luck with the ladies, I take it." Luke remarked casually, preparing another arrow before the older teen could start his tantrum.

"What? No. It was going very well!"

What a shame, already seventeen and still unable to distinguish daydreams from reality.

Firing another shot, the arrow landed near the bullseye. Luke cursed under his breath and drew his bow again. As he adjusted his stance, he replied to his frenemy with a distracted tone, "Oh, I'm sure it was."

"Yeah, it would have worked if you hadn't tried to kill me." Levi grumbled, clearly bothered at being made a fool in front of two pretty girls.

“Clearly.” The blonde agreed dryly, not even bothering to correct that it was, in fact, an accident.

"Obvious—Wait! Don’t mock me!" The older teen exclaimed, likely gesturing rudely or doing something that Luke couldn’t be bothered to look at, as he remained focused on the target.

"Mocking? I'm just agreeing with you." Luke retorted airily, shooting and finally landing his arrow in the bullseye.

"With that disdainful face? No, you aren't." Levi said, squinting suspiciously at him for a moment.

Turning to face his friend, he blinked innocently and remarked, "Disdainful? I'm concentrating, you know, participating in the lessons.” *Unlike you.*

Levi harrumphed in disbelief, about to retort—something unpleasant, Luke was sure—when he noticed something that made him smirk. Giving a particularly annoying glance at the younger boy, Levi drawled, "And what about you? I hear the Aphrodite kids are chasing after you like a pack of hunting dogs now. Something about playing hard to get and how it would be a great honor to, and I quote, break that pretty boy’s heart."

Shivering, Luke automatically scanned the area for any stray Cabin Ten campers. With a sigh of relief, he noticed the coast was clear.

But who knew if talking about them could summon one of them?

They were like demons, appearing suddenly and without warning, with their fake, sugary-sweet smiles and fluttering eyelashes. The girls, boys, and everyone in between seemed to make it their mission to ‘seduce’ Luke, as if it were some grand game. In a way, it mirrored how his own siblings enjoyed challenging each other to steal things—the more difficult the task, the greater the prestige.

It was vexing, making Luke feel like a piece of meat dangled in front of a pack of hyenas. Besides, it made him uncomfortable; they were just children, and Luke felt like some strange combination of a teenager and an adult—neither one nor the other, yet somehow both at once.

Huffing, he replied with a hint of irritation bleeding through his tone, "They are disrespectful, refusing to listen when I tell them not to bother me."

"I see…" Levi hummed, watching something behind Luke's head with clear amusement. Then, he sighed dramatically, "In any case, it seems you have more luck than I do. And you don't even take it."

“I *don’t* want to take it.”

Dating was the last thing on his mind; it was incredibly awkward to be around horny teenagers when he himself was, currently, a teenager. Add the maturity gap and his past life, and things became complicated and confusing very quickly.

Levi glanced at him, his brows furrowed, likely taken aback by how vehement Luke's words had sounded. For some reason, Luke felt compelled to explain himself, even though he knew he could simply refuse to talk—his life was his own business, and his choices were his own.

"I have too much on my plate."

In a way, it wasn't entirely untrue. The counselor position was quite demanding, especially with his brother aiming to take it away from him—or, to be honest, take it from Aubrey. He had to stay vigilant for any signs that Ed was trying to usurp Luke's responsibilities, and always make an effort to spend time with his siblings and the unclaimed to secure their support.

Then there were his own issues: the longing for his parents from another life, his mother before she succumbed to her madness, and even his grandmother whom he barely knew. The stress of having to constantly look over his shoulder, the distant yet ever-present figure of his now-father, and the uncertain future weighed heavily on his mind.

*The Fates.*

All in all, a shitty situation. But he tried to keep himself distracted.

Levi's expression softened with sympathy. The blonde knew he understood; the older teen was one of his key allies in maintaining influence among the unclaimed. This alliance was crucial in preventing another major conflict like the one when Luke first arrived at Camp. It also helped that he and the unclaimed shared a common 'enemy': Edward.

Everyone knew that if Ed managed to win, it would be a great loss for the demigods who weren't children of Hermes.

It wouldn't be fair, but few things in life were.

Fortunately, Luke *understood* their problems. He had even swallowed his fear during one of the excursions to Olympus to present his case for why Cabin Eleven deserved an expansion.

Unfortunately, it didn't amount to much. Hermes appeared quite attentive during the presentation, but Luke doubted he was truly listening. The other gods seemed bored and dismissed the idea, claiming that expanding Cabin Eleven would be favoritism. They argued that if one cabin expanded, all cabins would need to expand. Since only Luke's own faced overpopulation problems, the issue was swept under the rug.

"Well, I think it's pretty clear you'll win." Levi declared, crossing his arms behind his head. "The only ones who seem to actually want Ed in charge are Barry and Chase, but I don't think they'll stick around at Camp, you know? They'll probably go off to college."

"Maybe. But I have a bad feeling." Luke confessed with a frown.

Talking about Cabin Ten had initially eased his tension, but now the uneasiness was creeping back in—a constant and persistent rock lodged in his throat, undesired but always there.

“You worry too much. That way you’ll have gray hairs before you hit twenty.” Levi said with a careless flair, waving someone over from behind Luke.

Luke narrowed his eyes, deciding that the quip didn't deserve the saliva it would take to voice a comeback, and turned to see whom the older demigod was calling over. Katherine approached with a sinuous grace, moving like a snake, quiet and composed—a stark contrast to the babbling baboon beside Luke.

Out of the corner of his eye, Luke noticed Lee staring at them. When their eyes met, Fletcher's expression seemed to lighten, the shade of *something* in his gaze melting away as he smiled warmly at Luke. Without much thought, Luke called him over, and Fletcher eagerly obliged, nearly tripping over his own feet as he hurried to join the little group.

Bemused, Luke wondered what was with his two male friends and their lack of grace. They certainly needed to learn a thing or two from Katherine.

“Friendships.” Kat greeted lightly. She scanned the archery range, her gaze settling on a specific spot. As if discussing the weather, she noted, “Today, many of our fellow demigods seem to have ended up injured. A great mystery indeed—even our own cabin-mates, like Barry, were affected.” Despite her soft tone, Luke could see the vindication in her eyes.

"It's the mood." Lee explained. "Everyone's been feeling off ever since the *news*. We've been treating more injuries than usual lately, whether from fights breaking out or..." He pointed to a guy who had just shot an arrow into his friend's butt. "That."

Zeus' order had become public knowledge now. Luke supposed it was hard to keep it a secret when almost all able-bodied satyrs vanished from Camp Half-Blood overnight. Which included Grover. Dean, who was stuck in Camp, was not thrilled about this, but Luke knew the young boy would succeed.

*He had to.*

It was a great shock to everyone, and it made them all scared. Some said it was a bad sign and that they shouldn't let the cursed girl step into Camp, while others argued that Camp Half-Blood was a safe haven for all demigods and refusing her would be condemning one of their own to die. Predictably, these differing opinions led to conflicts and fights.

Obviously, some didn't have an opinion, but those who did were causing enough havoc to make up for it.

It would be funny if it weren't so problematic. Camp Half-Blood was little more than a summer camp, yet the children always created their own divisions and politics. Sometimes, Luke wondered why they didn't follow Camp Jupiter's example and establish their own city, but he guessed it was because the Greek gods were more involved than the Romans. The Olympians' reaction to his plea was proof enough of their influence.

"More work. More dirtiness." Kat complained wearily, a flash of disgust crossing her face before she masked it with her usual serene expression.

"Yeah, but at least you have a choice." Lee replied, dark shadows beneath his eyes highlighting his exhaustion. "Cabin Seven handles all the medical stuff for the entire Camp. We're completely swamped."

Cautiously, Luke side-eyed Katherine. She seemed outwardly placid, like a tranquil lake, but he knew there was more beneath the surface. He'd heard enough of her complaints to understand her grudge against Cabin Seven was personal—likely coming from the day they had dismissed her help, claiming they could do everything better than her.

“If you people allowed others to help freely, maybe it wouldn’t be so tiring.” Kat softly rebuked, her words carrying a subtle undertone that almost went unnoticed.

*And there it was.*

Shuffling uneasily, Lee nodded hesitantly. "It would be a great help for sure. I really appreciate you taking the time to help in the infirmary."

The silence that followed was a bit awkward.

Levi cleared his throat and suggested, "Why don't we have Fletcher here show us how Cabin Seven practices their archery? The girls refused to give me a demonstration..."

"Have you been bothering my sisters?" Lee asked, narrowing his eyes suspiciously.

As Levi attempted to justify his actions as simply friendliness, Luke's attention was inexplicably drawn beyond the archery range, towards the cabin’s direction. On the horizon, a black dot appeared to be rapidly approaching.

Squinting, he disregarded his friends and let his bow drop to the ground, a sense of dread growing in his gut. It was then that Luke noticed Abigail had silently moved to stand beside him, her lips pursed as she stared into the distance.

Gradually, the black dot began to take shape: four legs, a curled tail, and a snout. It was Pipo, disobeying Luke’s order to stay at their cabin for some unknown reason. In a few moments, the dog reached Luke, grabbing the boy’s sweatpants between his teeth, tugging forcefully and nearly causing the demigod to fall face first to the ground.

"Wait! You'll tear it!" Luke exclaimed, struggling to pry his dog's jaws away from his clothing.

Pipo released Luke's leg and began circling in place, barking insistently. Soon, the commotion caught the attention of other campers and Chiron, the latter trotting over with a frown creasing his face.

“What seems to be the matter?”

"I'm not sure." Luke said, frustration making him furrow his brow. "Pipo just went crazy."

"No." Abigail declared, drawing everyone's attention. Unfazed by their stares, she continued, "He *feels*. Just like I do."

*What the hell is this woman talking about?* Luke thought perplexedly, *I knew I should have stopped her from eating those mushrooms; they killed her neurons.*

Just as she said that, a horn sounded in the distance. It wasn't one of the usual ones; it had a frantic tone to it.

"Cabin Seven!" Chiron shouted, already galloping towards the sound. "Come with me, quickly!"

There was a momentary pause filled with confusion, but then the children of Apollo seemed to snap out of it and began to move frenetically, running after the centaur. Cabin Eleven swiftly followed suit, and as they approached the Camp barriers, more campers seemed to appear.

Luke ran alongside Lee, keeping pace with his younger friend. His legs felt heavy, as if he were running through sand. A sense of foreboding gnawed at him, growing stronger by the moment.

Straight ahead, near the Camp Half-Blood limits, Chiron and a group of children from Cabin Seven formed a circle around something. Among them was Latifa, bloodied and visibly worn out but still intact. She shouted orders to her siblings, who obeyed without question, all wearing serious and determined expressions.

It was a familiar look to him.

Luke watched numbly as Lee joined the group, the younger demigod grabbing his arm in a show of support, determination etched on his face. Katherine followed closely behind, offering her services to Cabin Seven with a sense of agitation Luke had never seen from her before.

The only thing he could see was a golden glow, with dozens of voices chanting in Ancient Greek amidst the oppressive silence.

All around him, the other campers watched. A hundred eyes were fixed on the scene before them, an ambiguous mass of onlookers. Their gaze was a heavy weight that Luke could almost feel, and the anticipation was palpable, lingering on his tongue like a bitter taste.

Wide-eyed, Luke stepped closer, his head whipping back and forth as he searched the circle frantically.

He couldn’t see Aubrey.

Where was she?

Where was his sister?

Edward was there, his voice hoarse as he shouted something at a man with a ruined face. The man stood apathetically, his mind seemingly far away, eyes wide and unseeing, while crimson-red blood painted one side of his face in a macabre display of torn and disfigured flesh.

With horrified fascination, Luke realized it was Axel.

He didn't understand.

He didn't *want* to understand.

Holding Axel by the collar, Ed continued to scream, tears streaming down his face, until one of Apollo's older children intervened and pulled them apart. The golden-haired teenager then proceeded to examine the unresponsive man, who stared blankly at something in the center of the circle.

Suddenly, all sound faded away from Luke's senses, replaced by a clear, vibrating sound inside his head—a snap, like a thread being cut by a pair of scissors.

Before his eyes, the golden glow slowly dimmed. The children of Apollo paused their chanting, and one by one, they reluctantly stepped back. Some, including Lee, persisted with desperate vigor until they too had no choice but to relent.

It was as though the world held its breath alongside him as the circle slowly disbanded. Latifa remained, kneeling beside a bundle laid on the ground, tears streaming down her face as she softly whispered to it.

Compelled by an unseen force, Luke moved closer to them.

As he approached, the features of the bundle became clearer. First, he noticed the long, curly black hair, then her glassy blue eyes, and finally, he saw it.

His sister was not whole.

He abruptly halted in his tracks, staring at her with incomprehension. In a daze, Luke vaguely registered that his hands were trembling.

Distantly, he felt fingers harshly gripping his shoulders, forcefully turning him around.

Ed's wild gaze met Luke's, his words drowned out by the buzzing in Luke's ears. He stared blankly at his older brother. With desperation, Ed took hold of the boy's face in his hands, his plea gradually becoming audible. He pressed Luke's face against his chest, a tear falling onto the younger demigod's cheek as Ed chanted, "Don't look, please, don't look."

*Remember all those poor, beautiful souls*.

His mother's frenzied words echoed in his mind, blending with his brother's voice until reality and imagination blurred in the haze of his confusion.

Suddenly, Luke heard a loud scream, a bellow of sorrow and gut-wrenching grief. Belatedly, he realized it had come from himself.

In the distance, a mournful howl echoed, mirroring Luke's cries.

Chapter End Notes

So, yeah. Creepy dream and sad stuff.

The news are now public knowledge, everyone knows Thalia is coming, and all have *opinions* on it. Which is understandable. I mean, the Big 3 Pact is well known.

Aphrodite kids doing their break hearts initiation thing, while Luke is creeped out by it, and well, he's a kid but not, an adult but not. Confusing and better to be romanceless for a while, a long while. Which, well, will be interesting, since he will become the oldest demigod at Camp in the future.

And tragedy. Very sad and I teared up when writing it, I have to confess. I just imagined it like a movie scene and it became more vivid.

Thank you all for reading! Comments are always appreciated! What was your favorite part (heartbreaking stuff included) in this chapter?

# Chapter 15: Teenhood - A father's love

Chapter Summary

Uncle D saves the day.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Luke stared as his sister's shroud burned. It was a beautiful, high-quality fabric, orange like the setting sun and adorned with motifs of hawks battling snakes, exactly as Luke had requested.

Aubrey, he believed, was as fierce and noble as the bird of prey itself.

Watching the fire consume the clashing animals and the smoke billow upward, Luke could almost imagine his sister emerging from her earthly form as a hawk crafted from black ashes, as dark as her hair, soaring away to freedom.

A childish fantasy, he knew.

Luke hadn't slept a wink last night, and he doubted any of his roommates had either. Cabin Eleven had started their preparations at dawn, working in grief-laden silence as soon as the sun peeked over the horizon. Given the circumstances, they had been granted the day off to honor their counselor.

Yet, as he watched his sister's shell turn to ash, Luke wondered where this so-called honor could be found.

*The dead are dead; this whole performance was for the living, for they were the ones who had need of comfort.*

Soon after yesterday's…events, Aubrey's body had been taken by a group of Apollo campers, led by their head counselor, Latifa, and accompanied by Luke's only remaining sister, Abigail, to be prepared for the funeral in a location unknown to him.

As tradition dictated, the next-of-kin had to perform a ritual bathing and anoint the deceased with oil. They placed coins on the eyes to pay for passage to the afterlife and dressed the body in clothing appropriate for their status. Aubrey was…had been a warrior, one of the best in Cabin Eleven, so she was dressed in full regalia—a complete set of Greek armor. Throughout the whole process, the relative was supposed to sing songs of lament and mourning.

As the only daughter of Hermes remaining at Camp Half-Blood, Abigail had stayed by Aubrey's side all afternoon and through the night, with no one else to assist her.

This morning, she had reappeared to join them in their procession, looking worn out, her eyes haunted and her demeanor twitchy, as if she were seeing ghosts. Luke had wanted to share in her misery and ask questions about her strange behavior over the last few days, but she continued to avoid him—and everyone else, for that matter.

In the end, he had left her alone, walking with his remaining siblings at the front of the march as they carried Aubrey to a secluded corner of the forest, far from the cabins and the Big House. Upon reaching their destination, they gently placed their older sister in an intricately carved box set upon a polished rock that served as a makeshift altar in the center of the clearing.

Shortly after, Edward, as the second eldest, delivered a short eulogy, looking as disoriented as Luke felt, before hesitating for a brief moment and then proceeding to set fire to the shroud, fulfilling his duty.

And there Luke stayed, watching the fire consume the remnants of Aubrey, carrying her soul away to a place he couldn't easily reach—perhaps not at all—while the other mourners gathered, finding solace in each other's company.

When his own end comes, where will he go? A wandering soul, foreign to this world and of a different faith altogether; maybe he would continue traveling blindly, maybe he would find himself in another afterlife.

He didn't know.

Looking around to distract himself from his own thoughts, Luke noticed Axel, his face now marred by an ugly, crooked scar that stretched across the entire right side, still pink and tender from treatment by the Cabin Seven healers. The pale man looked lost, staring into the flames with unseeing eyes, and Luke felt a pang in his heart at the sight.

Suppressing his tears, Luke approached Axel and wordlessly positioned himself beside the older demigod, offering a silent gesture of support. His sister's boyfriend didn't acknowledge his presence, seemingly unaware as he stared fixedly at the altar.

They remained in silence like that for a long while, observing the flames until the last ember died out.

Then Axel spoke, his voice filled with anguish as he continued to gaze ahead. "It should have been me."

Alarmed, Luke turned to the older man, his words faltering as he tried to protest, "No! No, it wasn't your fault."

"But it was." Axel answered miserably, a tear spilling from his eye. "If she hadn't...if only I had done it earlier. Edward was right. It's my fault. Aubrey, she's bright and fierce and brave." He paused, his voice cracking as he corrected himself, "Was. She was."

"Ed doesn’t know what he’s talking about." Luke replied as firmly as he could manage, scared that this little remaining piece of his sister would disappear as well. With a shaky sigh, he continued, "You're not at fault, Axel. Don’t say such things. What would Aubrey think?"

"What does it matter?" Axel retorted, his eyes hollow as he glanced at the boy. "My love is dead."

With that, the pale man drifted away aimlessly, like a ghost, as if all color had been drained from his world. Luke stared at the back of his head, feeling paralyzed by a sense of helplessness.

His world was slowly crumbling away, and he couldn’t do *anything*.

Looking at Aubrey’s ashes, Luke gripped the ends of his shirt like a child and pleaded desperately, his vision gradually blurring.

*Sister, oh sister, I beg of you, tell me what to do.*

Suddenly, a touch on his arm snapped him out of his thoughts. Rubbing his eyes, he turned to see Dean, who met his gaze with a concerned frown.

"Let's get you out of here, little bird." The satyr insisted, guiding the younger boy away with a steadfast grip on his shoulder, far from the post-funeral banquet.

They walked, Luke following his friend until they reached nature spirit territory, deep in the least-known parts of the forest where demigods rarely ventured. Dean moved with ease; Luke had gathered that this was where the older teen and his kin lived. Now empty, as most satyrs were in the normal world searching for Thalia.

"Much better, isn’t it?" His friend remarked, gesturing to the serene and idyllic clearing around them as he settled on a rock.

Luke nodded half-heartedly, taking in the calming scenery as he sat on a tree root, wringing his hands restlessly.

Before long, the tranquility of the place began to ease the stiffness in his muscles. Only then did he realize how tense he had been the entire day, with exhaustion dragging down his limbs and grief bending his spine as if a great weight rested upon his shoulders.

Tilting his head back toward the sky, he closed his eyes, letting a gentle breeze wash over him and playfully ruffle his hair. The air seemed to calm the storm of emotions in his chest, easing the pain that had been ever-present since yesterday. In this moment, Luke could simply exist, breathing without his grief threatening to suffocate him.

"I know how difficult this is." Dean began, hesitating briefly as if unsure how his words would be received. When Luke looked at him inquisitively, the satyr continued with a bit more confidence, "I've lost people too, many people. It's part of the Protector's job, you know." Sighing heavily, Dean suddenly appeared older, his shoulders slumping and creases forming on his forehead. “It gets better. Coping becomes easier.”

The demigod hummed softly as he studied his friend and commented carefully, "Does it?"

Grief, Luke had discovered, was a cruel beast. It resided inside one's torso, hidden beneath the ribs, gnawing at the heart incessantly, never satisfied. Sometimes, it slept, after consuming its fill, granting its host a fleeting moment of peace and happiness. Yet, this respite was always temporary. At other times, it would awaken to assert its presence, a relentless reminder that it had not departed and never would.

"You'll never forget. But with time, the pain will dull." Dean asserted, picking up a leaf that had drifted down from a nearby tree and twirling it between his fingers. Placing the leaf in his palm, the satyr blew gently on it, watching as it slowly floated further away, gradually disappearing from view. "You'll feel their absence, but eventually, you'll get used to it. Life goes on; it always does."

"I suppose." Luke replied softly, his gaze dropping to his interlaced hands. Dean didn't press further, content to share his space with the younger boy in silence.

The demigod wasn't used to delving deep into his own emotions. They often felt tangled and confusing, not something he'd spent much time thinking about. With Mr. D's guidance, he was gradually becoming more comfortable with them, finding new coping mechanisms. However, it was hard. Luke disliked feeling out of control, especially in front of others.

It was a habit from a lifetime ago that was stubbornly persisting in this one, fueled by early life experiences with his now-mother and absent godly father.

To be strong. To be in control. To never show weakness.

For his family. For him. For *her*.

*But*, he thought as he stole a glance at Dean, *maybe it was good to be vulnerable once in a while.*

"I..." Luke hesitated, then took a deep breath and confessed, "I'm scared."

"Of what?" Dean prompted gently.

"The future, I guess." The younger boy replied uncertainly, hesitant about how much he wanted to share. There were certain things he couldn't reveal to anyone. With a shaky sigh, Luke continued, "Axel, Edward, the cabin."

Dean's expression softened into sympathy as he answered, "I can't promise the road ahead will be easy. But I can promise I'll be there for whatever you need." With a playful glint in his eye, the satyr teased gently, "I will be there until you get tired of me, little bird. We imprinted on each other." He held his hand out, as if gauging the height of a nine-year-old Luke. "I still remember when you were this tall, refusing to let go of my shirt, following me like a duckling."

Luke huffed, but was unable to suppress his smile—the first since yesterday. "You're ridiculous."

“And that’s precisely why you keep me around.” The satyr replied with mock seriousness, wiggling his finger playfully.

"You wish." Luke grumbled with a teasing glint in his eye. "This relationship is totally one-sided, like a dog and its tick."

Dean paused for a moment, scrunching his face in thought and stroking his chin. Then he asked, "So, who's the dog and who's the tick?"

"The dog is clearly me." The demigod answered primly, lifting his nose in the air haughtily. "And the tick can only be you."

Gasping dramatically, Dean pressed his hand against his heart and leaned back as if struck by an arrow. "Sacrilege! Reduced to a parasite! To be so betrayed by one’s own friend!"

Luke couldn't hold back his giggles and started laughing—a deep, unrestrained, and spontaneous laughter—while Dean continued with his theatrical indignance. Their casual banter eased Luke's mood, and suddenly, the day seemed brighter, as if it had regained its color.

After pausing to catch his breath, the demigod softly murmured, his words drifting on the breeze, "Dean, *thank you*."

“Don’t mention it. That’s what friends are for.” The satyr said simply. He stood up and walked over to Luke, extending a hand to help him rise.

As Luke brushed dust and leaves from his clothes, Dean contorted his face oddly and began sniffing the air.

"Why are you making that face?" The younger boy asked, amused by his friend's loud inhaling.

Turning around, Dean furrowed his brow and inquired, "Did you bring your hellhound to the funeral?"

Luke frowned in confusion and shook his head. He had instructed Pipo to stay back at Cabin Eleven. After yesterday's fiasco, people were even more uneasy around the hellhound—not that they had been comfortable before, but it had worsened.

Somehow, his dog had become a bad omen overnight.

A loud bark echoed through the woods, and Luke barely dodged in time before Pipo landed at his feet with a thud, his tongue lolling as he used the momentum to dash past the demigod.

Both boys stared in bewilderment as the dog ran circles around them, until he finally slowed and stopped in front of them. Even so, Pipo remained restless and excited, dancing on his paws.

Exchanging a glance with Dean, Luke addressed the dog firmly, "I told you to stay home."

Pipo tilted his head cutely, his tongue lolling out making him even more adorable. Clenching his fist, the demigod roughly stomped on the urge to pet him. It wouldn't be good to encourage this type of behavior.

Advancing, Dean locked eyes with the dog. With narrowed eyes, the older teen asked, "What brings you to the home of the nature spirits, hellhound?"

Satyrs could communicate with animals, Luke knew. But it was still amusing to witness it in action; his friend appeared almost like a lunatic, listening intently while Pipo barked and whined. Strangely, though, Luke had a sense of their conversation—not in words, but like a feeling, a *very* vague feeling.

He only understood that he was needed somewhere else. That's it.

Yet, considering Dean's increasingly dumbfounded expression, Luke harbored a *tiny* suspicion that there was more to it than just that.

"Can't it be delayed for another day?" The satyr almost demanded, his tone insistent.

Pipo snorted, then thumped his paw on the ground pointedly, growling.

Infuriated, Dean jabbed a finger at the dog's snout and hissed, "I don't appreciate you pulling rank on me, furball." The satyr clicked his tongue in resignation. "But if it's him...there's nothing I can do."

"What's going on?" Luke interjected, displeased that they were discussing him without including him in the conversation.

Dean twisted his mouth uncertainly, about to answer, when Pipo cut him off with a determined bark and tugged on Luke's sweatpants, urging him to follow.

Before doing so, Luke glanced back at the satyr, who watched with a conflicted expression. Catching Luke's indecisive gaze, Dean smiled reassuringly and nodded slightly, indicating he should go ahead.

Hesitantly, the demigod followed the dog, retracing the path he had taken earlier with Dean after the funeral. Frowning in suspicion, Luke glanced at the sky, trying to gauge the time—it was late afternoon, approaching dinner, and his cabin had likely left long ago, done with the ceremony. Perhaps that was why Pipo had come after him; Luke had spent more time in the forest than he had realized, and his absence might have been noticed.

This assumption was quickly proven wrong as soon as he stepped back into the clearing where his sister had been cremated. With the ritual complete, her ashes had been moved elsewhere. But the place was not empty.

There was a figure there, leafing through a book Luke couldn't identify from afar, so familiar that it made his heart clench and soar with hope. For a moment, he thought Aubrey had risen from the dead and returned to them. But the longer he looked, the more it felt like a bucket of cold water had been dumped over him.

The stranger was too tall, shoulders too broad and hair too short to be his sister.

Frozen in place, Luke could only watch as Pipo rushed ahead, playfully circling the man with the familiarity of a dog accustomed to him. The stranger paused his reading and leaned down, scratching the dog behind the ear with a sly smirk—the kind Barry wore when a heist he had planned went perfectly.

"You'll get extra treats later for a job well done." The man promised in a clear, cordial voice that sounded like it belonged to a politician or, Luke anxiously thought, a *diplomat*.

Feeling completely off-kilter, the demigod stared at Pipo with disbelief and a deep sense of betrayal. This man, his *father*, was overly familiar with the dog, acting in a way that suggested this *bribery* was a routine they were both well used to.

How long was this going on?

Suddenly, it all made a terrible amount of sense—why Pipo was so attentive to the comings and goings of Cabin Eleven and why he occasionally disappeared.

Unable to suppress it, Luke shot an ugly look at the dog, causing Pipo's ears to flatten against his skull as he whined, his big, ruby eyes staring at him pathetically. Luke remained unmoved; he couldn't trust the hellhound.

Not anymore.

"Don't be so harsh on him, son. He only did what I asked." Hermes remarked, straightening to his, admittedly, quite impressive height. Turning to face Luke with a warm smile, his bright blue eyes studied the boy's face intently.

"What you asked?" Luke repeated weakly, cautiously moving to the other side of the clearing. Hermes' gaze followed the demigod's every move without wavering.

Tilting his head in a bird-like manner, the god's eyes flashed with *something* as he watched Luke place the rock between them. Thankfully, he didn't move closer, though the demigod knew he easily could.

Waving his hand dismissively, Hermes sighed, "I had received conflicting reports, so I found a solution." Smirking impishly, the god appeared entirely self-satisfied as he glanced at his son. "And you had just asked for a dog."

Luke's eyes widened unconsciously at the implications as he stared at his father's smug face and blurted out, "Pipo is a spy?"

"Such a harsh word... I prefer to think of him as a helper, maybe even a guardian." Hermes mused thoughtfully. He smiled at Luke, his eyes crinkling, and added, "But yes, if you mean it like that, he does keep me informed about what's happening around you."

*What the fuck. Hermes has been monitoring me?* Luke thought hysterically, gripping and releasing his shirt in anxiety as he stood under his father's unsettling gaze, feeling paralyzed like prey before a far stronger predator.

"That satyr friend of yours, Dean, was it?" Hermes began deliberately, slowly circling the rock. Luke, clumsily forcing his legs to move, struggled to circle in the opposite direction. "I quite like the nickname he gave you." The god said, looking very pleased. "*Little bird;* very fitting, especially considering one of my sacred animals is a hawk."

The demigod stayed silent, his mind still processing his father's casually revealed knowledge. If Hermes knew about something so minor, what else was he aware of?

Before Luke could ponder it further, Hermes, seeming bored with their little game of chase, appeared in front of him in the blink of an eye. With a familiarity that made the teen uncomfortable, the god lifted one hand and gently tilted Luke's chin to meet his gaze, studying him so meticulously that Luke wondered if his father could see into his soul after all.

"You're beginning to resemble your mother more." Hermes finally noted, his expression twisting slightly as he traced Luke's features with his progressively darkening eyes.

*He's touching me. He's touching me. He's touching me.*

Luke forcefully pulled his face from his father's hands, stepping back until a considerable distance separated them. To a deity, and even to a demigod as fast as Luke, the space meant nothing—they could cross it in less than a second. Thankfully, Hermes merely furrowed his brows and let his hand drop to his side, remaining where he stood.

Awkwardly, they stared at each other.

Then, Hermes cleared his throat and lifted the book he had been holding all this time to show to Luke. With a start, the boy realized it was the gift he had intended for his sister—the one he had thrown away somewhere the previous night while consumed with grief, unable to bear looking at it.

"You've done well, Luke. You know, when I was just a baby, I invented the lyre." Hermes said casually. He winked playfully and added, "Maybe you'll be a craftsman, too."

*How dare he*.

They stood at Aubrey's funeral site, her gift stolen right under Luke's nose and now in the hands of their absentee father, who showed no hint of sadness. Luke didn't expect grief, but he had hoped for some acknowledgment that his sister's death had affected the god, even if only a little.

"Lord Hermes—" Luke began with some bite on his tone.

"Father." Hermes interrupted sharply, the mask of pleasantness crumbling from his face, revealing a serious expression. "For you, I'm father, or dad."

"Father." The demigod quickly corrected himself, choosing the less familiar address. The god's smile returned like it had never left, though Luke couldn't shake the feeling it held a

hint of disappointment. But perhaps it was just his own nerves playing tricks on him. With a bitterness he couldn't conceal, he added, "That's my sister's gift."

Humming softly, Hermes gently traced his finger over the painted griffin on the book's front cover, a touch of melancholy on the gesture. "Aubrey was a brave girl. She honored me greatly and died a hero. She'll go to Elysium."

"Do you even care?" Luke blurted out, then widened his eyes in alarm at his own words.

Pausing, his father lifted his blue—*there was something lacking in them, Luke could swear*—eyes toward him. Looking somewhat hurt, Hermes replied, "Of course I do. I care very much. But gods cannot interfere in their children's lives."

*Excuses. Always with the lack of accountability. What does avoiding interference in his kid's life have to do with his lack of emotion?* Luke thought irritably.

Maybe something had shown on his face, because his father began to approach, moving deliberately and clearly telegraphing his movements. He only stopped when Luke unconsciously stepped back.

"I'm the god of travelers, son." Hermes stated solemnly. With a hint of pride, he continued, "I know better than anyone that my children must forge their own paths. You must understand this too, having left your mother's house and reached Camp Half-Blood without anyone's help."

*As if I risked my life to reach safety for you, of all people.*

"I don't care about any of that." Luke retorted, cursing himself for the tremor in his voice.

Hermes edged closer. "When I was a baby, I escaped my cradle and made my way towards —"

"We're mortal! We're nothing like you!" Luke exclaimed, retreating so hurriedly that he nearly tripped over his own feet. But his father advanced swiftly, closing the distance between them in an instant. Hermes' hand shot forward, holding the side of Luke's neck firmly.

"You're *my* son."

Luke had to tilt his head back to meet his father's gaze. Hermes looked less human at this moment, his eyes glowing a shocking blue, power radiating from him in waves. It felt like being thrust into a dark alley, blindfolded and bound as knives pierced through his flesh. Cold and dark. The touch of something belonging to the Underworld.

Then, a phone call rang insistently.

Gradually, Hermes composed himself, his aura transforming back into a calming presence so subtle that Luke only now realized it was there at all. As he pulled out his phone, Hermes extended the antenna and two miniature green snakes appeared, coiling around it—much to Luke's disbelief, despite a lifetime of encountering strange things as a demigod.

His father stared at the screen with a displeased expression, clicking his tongue dismissively. After stuffing his phone back into his pocket, Hermes turned back to face Luke, though this time with a hint of uncertainty in his demeanor.

“Luke, I know this is a hard time for you. But I…I do care, about all of you.” Leaning down to lock eyes with his son, the god said earnestly, “I love you.”

Shuffling on his feet, Luke broke eye contact, his gaze drifting towards the path leading to the cabins with a hint of longing. He hadn't expected his first private meeting with his father to be like this, nor did he anticipate him being this...scary.

In the books, Hermes had seemed so *normal*. Was he like this during the year he had lived with Luke and his mother when he was just a baby? Suddenly, the demigod wished he could remember those days clearly.

Realizing Hermes was waiting for any kind of response, Luke hesitated before speaking in a soft voice, "You love me in a way I don’t understand, father."

Startled, the god recoiled as if struck, his face contorting with anguish briefly before settling into annoyance when his phone rang a second time. He took out his phone and huffed upon seeing the caller's identity. Before he could put it away, a familiar voice lazily drawled across the clearing.

“Ignoring my calls, are you, Hermes?” Mr. D glided into the clearing, a purple phone loosely held in his grasp.

“Dionysus.” Hermes greeted dryly, an obviously fake smile gracing his face.

Disregarding his brother's lack of enthusiasm, Mr. D raised an eyebrow at Luke, who noticed the glint in the wine deity’s eyes.

Mr. D had a plan.

"Lucy, you'll miss dinner at this rate, not that I care about what you brats do in your free time, of course." He sighed dramatically, then added, "But I suppose ensuring none of you starve is part of the job."

With a casual flick of his hand, Dionysus beckoned Luke over. He obeyed immediately, smoothly snatching the book from Hermes' loose grasp as he passed his father, then quickly hiding behind the Camp director.

There was no way in Hell that he was letting Aubrey’s gift remain on their father’s hands.

Peeking from behind Mr. D’s back, Luke saw Hermes’ eyes wrinkle with amusement and a hint of pride as he glanced at him. The expression swiftly turned to irritation when Mr. D shifted to conceal Luke from view.

"Now, what brings a busy god like you to my Camp?" Mr. D questioned casually. "Did a delivery go wrong or something to keep you here this long?"

"My daughter passed away." Hermes replied curtly. "And I was speaking to *my* son."

"Ah, a tragedy." Dionysus acknowledged briefly, and Luke knew Mr. D enough to affirm the god genuinely considered it as such. "But Lucy here has other matters to attend to and I'm sure you do as well."

Hermes stared Dionysus down, an unfriendly look in his gaze.

"I am the Messenger of the Gods. I can travel freely between mortal realms, divine realms, or even the Underworld."

"Yes, yes. Very impressive." Mr. D droned disinterestedly. "Quite tiring, isn't it?"

Stepping closer, Hermes released a bit of his aura as he loomed over his brother and spoke harshly, "It means I can enter other gods' domains without an invitation, *Dionysus*."

Mr. D's form seemed to quiver as he grew taller, leaner, and younger.

Suddenly, before Luke stood a rather handsome, if somewhat androgynous, young man who returned the other god's stare with an unfriendly gaze of his own, his power leaking from him in response to Hermes' challenge.

"*How rude*, especially coming from the god of diplomacy and hospitality himself."

"You seem to have forgotten you're only alive because of me." Luke's father taunted, smirking with a hint of cruelty.

Mr. D's aura flared uncontrollably for a moment, causing Luke's chest to constrict under its force. Desperately, the teen grabbed the back of the god's shirt, instantly causing Dionysus' aura to retract.

"Luke Castellan." Mr. D ordered, his eyes fixed on Hermes. "Return to your cabin."

"He is *my* son. He'll stay." The other god retorted harshly.

"Your son?" Dionysus echoed mockingly, subtly nudging Luke toward the woods. "He is more mine than he was ever yours."

*What kind of possessive bullshit is going on?* Luke thought as he sneakily retreated.

Hermes didn't seem to appreciate Mr. D's comment. He hissed something about a Big House meeting, which Luke couldn't quite make out, and then asked if Dionysus would like to repeat that incident.

Sensing the tension escalate between the men, Luke decided he didn't want to stick around to see what would happen when two gods came to blows.

He quickly turned around and ran off. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Pipo vanish into the shadows as the atmosphere around the clearing grew more and more oppressive.

Chapter End Notes

I researched some Ancient Greek funeral customs to write this. In my mind, it made sense to have the Greek Camp retain a few of these traditions, especially since Chiron has been there since its beginning and likely remembers this stuff; it's part of his culture and all.

Dean continues to be Luke's emotional support satyr. I think Luke trusts him more than the others since they almost died together, and Luke saw Dean willing to sacrifice himself to save Luke's life, which, I think, unconsciously made a quite significant impact.

The reveal of Pipo as a double agent and smarter than he appears.

And the star of the show: Hermes. Finally, he makes his appearance in the flesh. I tried to incorporate the charm he is known for and a touch of creepiness too. I'm not sure how successful it was, but I did my best. I think his behavior really demonstrates how gods don't quite understand mortals all that much--the crossing of boundaries, the pushiness, etc. This contrasts interestingly with Dionysus, who in my mind, *gets* the kids more, having once been a demigod hero himself. And, of course, the catfight had to happen. Dionysus is seriously gunning for the dad position.

Anyway, thanks for reading! If you enjoyed it, please consider leaving a kudos or a comment! Comments are always appreciated and provide me with encouragement to keep going ♥♥♥ I read and treasure each one!

# Chapter 16: Teenhood - Hardships

Chapter Summary

Luke's no good, very bad day ahead.

Chapter Notes

*Warning* Suicide attempt at the end, but nothing too graphic.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The day started to get complicated with two new arrivals to Cabin Eleven.

Luke stared at the two identical brats in front of him with some disbelief. He had been enjoying his lunch in peace when Mr. D appeared like a whirlwind, marching to Luke's table in the Dining Pavilion with the little kids struggling to follow him. The god's head was wrapped in gauze, and he limped slightly, but he carried himself with all the dignity he could muster, ignoring the whispers that followed his entrance.

The Camp director's absence at breakfast wasn't unusual; Mr. D rarely woke up before lunch. However, Luke knew today's disappearance had a different reason.

Yesterday, Hermes and Dionysus had a *disagreement* that he hadn't stayed to watch. Judging by the wine god's condition, it probably hadn't gone well.

Now, Luke had two new brats dumped in his lap to look after, and this was right after his cabin had just lost one of their own.

Great. Just *wonderful*.

"Well, welcome to Camp Half-Blood. I'm Luke Castellan, and I'll be in charge of you two from now on, or at least until you're claimed by your godly parent." Luke greeted politely, standing up to take two plates and beginning to fill them with rice, meat, beans, and veggies —the kind of meal that kids were supposed to eat.

He used the moment to discreetly study the new arrivals.

Both children were around seven, with mops of curly brown hair hanging in front of their blue eyes and skin the color of sand, the kind that tans well.

“I’m Travis Stoll!” The taller kid introduced himself excitedly. Before Luke could process what he had heard, Travis pointed his free hand to the slightly shorter kid holding his hand. “And this is Connor!”

"Nice to meet you both. Twins?" Luke asked, masking his shock behind a mask of courteousness.

More canon characters. And his brothers, no less.

The timing was too suspicious.

“No! Obviously, I’m the older brother. By one full year!” Travis protested with a cute pout, even raising one finger to emphasize his point.

"I see. Silly me." Luke commented lightly, smiling despite his own feelings about their unexpected arrival. He placed the plates in front of the children, then sat back down, intertwining his fingers beneath his chin as he prodded gently, "Did you come here with a Protector?"

"What is a Protector?" Connor spoke this time, his brow furrowed in confusion and his mouth smeared with rice.

Sighing, Luke leaned over and dabbed a napkin at the younger boy’s mouth. "A Protector is a satyr who brings kids like you to this place." He explained. "And yes, half-goat men are real."

Connor's eyes shone as he loudly whispered, "Cool!"

"We didn't have a goat-person take us here." Travis grumbled, furrowing his eyebrows as if it were some great injustice. "We only had a strange man come and talk to mom."

"A man?" The older demigod prompted, sensing they were finally getting somewhere.

“Yeah. It was really weird. It’s not easy to find mama.” Connor said absentmindedly, pushing the veggies to the corner of his plate. “But they seemed to know each other. They argued about something, and then mama brought us here.” He frowned, stabbing his fork onto the meat. “We had to travel all night long.”

Luke narrowed his eyes for a split second before relaxing his expression. Thankfully, none of the kids noticed.

“Eat your veggies, Connor.” He admonished when the kid tried to sneakily throw it onto his brother’s plate; at least Travis seemed to like vegetables. Keeping his gaze fixed on Connor to ensure he ate, albeit grumpily, Luke asked, “Are you sure the man didn’t have some hidden horns you didn’t notice? Satyrs are really good at finding people.”

Travis made a face, scrunching it in thought. Then he seemed to remember something and mused, “I didn’t see any horns. But he was very tall, and he seemed to have just been in a fight. Mom didn’t look very happy to see him though…”

Luke couldn’t believe it.

“And that happened last night?”

Forcing himself to calm down, Luke tried to convince himself it could be a simple coincidence, that Hermes wouldn’t be *that* insensitive.

However, his hopes were crushed when both kids nodded in agreement. On closer inspection, Luke noticed how tired the brats looked, their clothes ruffled as if they had barely any time to throw something on before getting in the car. Yet, their excitement at seeing new things seemed to overpower their exhaustion.

*Fine*. He could deal with this.

"Let me see if I got this right. A man came to your home last night, talked to your mother, and then she brought you here without any protest?" Luke repeated, a hint of incredulity in his tone.

"Not home." Connor corrected, grimacing as he ate the veggies. "But yeah."

"Mom said this was a home for kids like us." Travis chimed in, looking quite pleased. "She said we'd have lots of siblings to play with and we wouldn't have to move around so much anymore."

"Aren't you sad to leave your mom?" Luke asked with concern, momentarily forgetting the reason for his questions and setting aside his own feelings about the situation.

"A little." Travis replied, shrugging nonchalantly. "But this isn’t much different from what we’re used to. She's never really around that much anyway."

Meanwhile, Connor glanced down, making it difficult to gauge his feelings on the topic.

Luke didn’t know his father's intentions—whether he wanted to prove he cared about his children, replace Aubrey with two new siblings like they were shiny new toys, or some other obscure reason. But these kids were his brothers, and Luke had always had a soft spot for little children.

Cursed be his bleeding heart.

"Well." Luke cleared his throat. "Camp Half-Blood is like a big family. You'll be treated well here." Leaning forward as if about to share a secret, Luke whispered playfully to the kids, winking, "Who knows? Maybe we'll find out that you're my actual brothers, and then you'll be stuck with me forever."

They were, but they didn’t know it, and Luke wasn’t about to spoil the surprise.

Ducking his chin, Travis nodded shyly, stealing glances at the older boy.

In contrast, Connor raised his head for a moment and squinted at Luke, studying him throughly. Seeming satisfied with what he saw, he muttered, "I guess it would be nice to not change houses anymore."

"You won’t have to move anymore if you don’t want to." Luke promised. Rising to his feet, he ruffled both boys’ hair and gestured for Cabin Eleven to follow. "Let’s give you a tour of your new home, shall we?"

As they walked, Connor slipped his hand into Luke’s, while Travis stared wide-eyed at everything, his mouth gaping. He ran around in all directions until Ed appeared and held him up by the back of his shirt.

"A newbie." Edward noted with some amusement, then corrected himself upon seeing Connor, "Two newbies."

Luke briefly glanced at him and then quickly fixed his gaze ahead. He still felt awkward around his older brother, especially now that Aubrey had died. He simply couldn't shake the paranoia of being usurped.

But it wasn’t paranoia if they really were out to get him.

It was inevitable, he knew. His brother wasn’t doing all those missions and risking his life every two weeks for nothing.

And Luke was a far easier target than Aubrey had ever been.

"Yeah, they just got here." Luke said casually, tightening his grip on Connor’s hand, causing the younger boy to look at him with a questioning expression. He flashed a reassuring smile at Connor and continued as if nothing had happened, "They'll be staying year-round like us."

Ed hummed, tilting his head inquisitively as he examined the boys. Luke observed from the corner of his eye how his brother seemed to focus on the kids’ blue eyes, curly hair, and elfish features, all the more apparent of whose loins they all descended from now that Luke had met Hermes up close.

"I see." Ed replied with a suspicious twinkle in his eyes, setting Travis back on the ground. With a grin, he declared to the two children, "I could give you two a tour of Camp Half-Blood."

Ah. So that’s how the undermining was going to start.

*Marvelous*.

Travis nodded eagerly, his head bobbing so quickly that Luke worried it might detach. Meanwhile, Connor looked at the older demigod with an unsure frown, holding Luke’s hand more firmly.

"Edward." Luke turned to the older man, his expression serious as he spoke pointedly, "I'll be the one to show them around."

With a guileless look he didn’t trust at all, Ed replied casually, "Sure, little brother. But maybe I could lend a hand? You've been so busy these past few days, and we all know how close you were with Aubrey..."

Suddenly, Luke came to a halt, causing Cabin Eleven to pause abruptly and prompting some campers to bump into each other with a few muttered curses.

Glaring at his brother, Luke gritted his teeth but managed a somewhat pleasant reply, "I appreciate the offer, but I can handle it myself."

Ed maintained his smile, but his gaze held a calculating glint as he acknowledged cordially, "I'm sure you've got it covered, birdie. But a bit of help from your *older* brother wouldn't hurt, right? We need to stick together now more than ever."

"I'll keep that in mind for when I need it.” Luke replied curtly. "But I don't see how much help you'd be when you're rarely at Camp."

Ed's response wasn't what Luke had anticipated, which was a clear sign to him that he had severely miscalculated.

The older boy's eyes gleamed with amusement as he gestured grandly and spoke loudly enough for Luke to be certain the entire line could hear him. "Ah, my adorable little brother." He began, "I've been here longer than you, so I'm quite confident I can guide our new campers just fine. But if you're referring to my quests... well, perhaps you should try going on one yourself. You've been stuck at Camp for what? Four years now? Maybe you'll understand the appeal of a change of scenery when you venture out for the first time."

Ah. Fuck.

He shouldn’t have let Ed’s comment about Aubrey affect him so much that he blurted out something so utterly stupid. It was evident that Edward was going to use his blunder against him, especially the fact that Luke didn’t have even one measly quest under his belt.

Now, in his thoughtless anger, he had succeeded in making his older brother look like the better option between the two of them—completely by accident.

His ears burned as he heard the other demigods gasp behind him. The whispering of dozens of campers put him on edge and embarrassed him at the same time.

Before he could formulate a response to avoid appearing weak, Abigail marched toward them and violently bumped shoulders with Edward. Ignoring their older brother’s protests, she turned to face Luke.

“I need to talk to you. Now.”

"But the kids—" Luke started to protest, unwilling to let Ed simply take over his responsibilities, especially after his recent blunder, and especially not with everyone's eyes on them.

“Now.” Abigail hissed, gripping the blonde’s arm harshly.

Luke was about to brush her off when he noticed the desperate glint in her eyes and the dark shadows beneath them. Frankly, his sister looked as if she were on the verge of becoming a ghost.

"Fine, fine." Luke sighed in defeat, beckoning Travis closer. He crouched down and spoke gently to the two uncertain children, "I'm sorry I can't show you around at the moment. I really wanted to. But I promise I'll make it up to you later." Lowering his voice conspiratorially for the Stoll brothers' ears alone, he added with a hint of mischief, "I can also show you some secret places. But this is just between us, alright?"

"Okay!" Both boys exclaimed, visibly more at ease now. Travis practically vibrated with excitement at the mention of secrets, his eyes shining. Connor was more subdued in his reaction, but he too appeared excited.

"Don't worry, little brother. I'll take good care of them while you're away." Ed assured, looking smug, like a cat that got the cream. He was probably pleased that an opportunity to prove himself the better option had fallen right into his lap.

In truth, Abigail wasn't helping by choosing *this* moment for a private conversation. Nevertheless, seeing how much she needed him, Luke felt compelled to accompany her. It wasn't the most strategic move, especially with his rival gaining an advantage, but he couldn't ignore his sister's need.

Standing up and facing his brother head-on, Luke locked eyes with Ed until the older man's brow furrowed slightly in discomfort. Then, and only then, he answered, "I'll trust you to do just that, no more and no less."

Turning away, he listened with some degree of satisfaction to the silence his words had caused, then hurried to catch up with Abigail, who was striding away with a speed that he didn't think her capable of.

He was led into the forest, a place that made him uneasy. Lately, whenever something happened, it seemed to occur in the woods. So Abigail taking him there already felt like a bad omen.

Soon, they stopped in a dark part of the woods, where the distorted trees cast eerie shadows and the faint light seeping through the canopy lent the place an unsettling air. Echoes of distant monster sounds added to the ominous atmosphere, almost as if the place had been taken straight out of a horror movie. It made Luke remember his mother's house and the way a green glow would permeate the place whenever she had an episode.

It was not a good memory.

Feeling unnerved but trying not to show it, Luke halted and turned to his sister. "Abigail, what's going on?"

She ignored him, examining the twisted trunks around them with her purplish-blue eyes that almost seemed to glow in the dark. The resemblance to their father was so striking that Luke had to look away, the comparison causing an uncomfortable knot in his stomach.

"I'm going to leave." Abigail finally answered, her gaze still fixed on the nearest trunk as she lifted a hand to touch it thoughtfully.

Luke whipped his head toward her so quickly that he felt a bit dizzy.

“What? What do you mean by 'leave'?” He demanded, marching closer with his fists clenched at his sides.

He couldn't believe it. Leave now, when everything was falling apart all around him?

"Today." Clarified Abigail, her haunting gaze fixed firmly on Luke. "I'm leaving today."

“Why?”

Luke *hated* how vulnerable he sounded, as if he were almost begging. He wanted to deny it, to say he wasn't pleading or even that he didn’t know why, but that would be a lie.

It was this simple: he couldn't bear to lose anyone else.

He had already lost too much.

"Sometimes—" His sister hesitated, releasing a shaky sigh. After a deep breath to compose herself, Abigail continued in a voice barely above a whisper, "You know, father is the god of many things. Thieves, travelers, herds... but many forget he is also a psychopomp. It's one of his responsibilities to guide the dead to the Underworld, and because of that, he's also a chthonic deity. Sometimes..."

“Sometimes one of his children inherits that domain.” Luke concluded sadly, expression mirroring his sister’s.

Abigail nodded, averting her gaze towards the tree as if she couldn’t bear eye contact with her younger brother. "It’s rare, but it happens."

“And you…” He whispered, but didn’t finish his sentence.

“I’m one of them.” She muttered, face contorting into an expression of outrage for a moment before it seemed to collapse into one of despair. “A living dead thing.”

"Don't say that. You're alive, Abigail." Luke said softly, stepping closer to her. He gently turned her around to face him; despite her height, she seemed small and hunched in that moment. Taking one of her hands, he placed his thumb on her wrist, feeling the steady pulse of her heartbeat. "You are alive. Your heart beats, your lungs demand breath. Even your completely irrational anger at your adorable little brother shows that you're too passionate to be a shade."

For a brief moment, Abigail snapped back to herself, her eyes flashing with irritation and her face contorting into a glower at his remark. But the spark faded quickly, and soon Luke watched as despair overtook her once more.

“I-I felt it.” She confessed.

"Felt what?" Luke prompted, feeling a bit thrown off by the sudden confession.

"I felt our sister die." Abigail clarified hauntingly, her eyes wide and unseeing, filled with tears as she stared at Luke, the purple hue in her gaze intensifying. "I felt Death loom over her like a promise, and it didn't go away until her soul detached from her flesh. The worst part was that I felt relief—relief that the awful feeling had finally stopped."

Speechless, Luke did the only thing he could think of to comfort both himself and his sister: he firmly grasped her hand, which she returned with a tight grip of her own.

"This place, Camp Half-Blood, doesn't take kindly to my ilk." Abigail continued, the words pouring out as if an invisible dam had burst. “They’re already looking at me weirdly after that day. Thankfully, the hellhound is the focus for now. But soon enough, they’ll see I’m just as much of an Underworld creature as he is.”

Luke had been avoiding Pipo since learning he was his father's informant. However, he couldn't help but notice the growing unease around the dog, how people instinctively edged away whenever he came into view.

Almost as if he was an omen of death.

It seemed irrational, even dumb. If Abigail's words applied to Pipo as well, then the dog likely sensed death and reacted by doing the only thing he could do: warning them.

In a sense, his sister had also attempted to warn them. Now, he regretted brushing it off as just another one of her unsuccessful attempts at her esoteric games.

Until now, at least.

With a shiver, Luke remembered his own moment of strangeness when he thought his mind was playing tricks on him upon seeing his sister's body. He recalled hearing a snap, a thread being cut, and now he wondered if it had actually happened.

Blinking rapidly to dispel those thoughts, he focused on his sister.

“You’re not a hellhound, Abigail.” Luke gently reminded her. “You’re one of us.”

“I *was* one of you.” She replied airily, releasing his hand and stepping back. “Now, I must thread my own path.”

For all the reasons she had listed, there was one Abigail hadn't mentioned, and that was the one he believed was the true motive behind her departure—a reason he couldn't fault her for.

She didn’t want to feel more death; not from those she loved.

Taking a shaky breath, Luke pleaded one last time, though he already knew it would be useless. Yet, he had to try.

“Please, sister, isn’t there anything I can do?

Abigail gazed at him for a moment, then approached, gently brushing away tears he hadn't realized were flowing down his cheeks. Her own eyes welled with tears as she smiled in a

heart-wrenching way.

"You're a good boy, Luke. But you can't help me. You're needed here. There are still many who have need of your light."

She withdrew into the shadows of the twisted trees, the dark seeming to reach out to her as she moved. Pausing, Abigail glanced back at him one last time, gesturing in a direction and announcing, "Someone needs you more than me, little brother. And for what it's worth, *thank you*."

Suddenly, the shadows seemed to come alive, twisting and extending their tendrils around Abigail until she sank into the ground and vanished, leaving Luke alone in the woods.

He stared at the spot where his sister had stood for a long while in silence. Then, rubbing his eyes, he began walking towards the direction she had indicated.

Maybe he couldn't help her. But she said there was someone that needed him and Luke wouldn't let himself fail anymore.

He ventured deeper into the woods, the surroundings growing increasingly ominous and hostile with every step. Anxiety crept over him, fearing an encounter with a horde of the monsters that dwelled within Camp Half-Blood's forests.

Then he heard a sound, like a rope being tied to something.

With ice filling his veins, Luke sprinted toward the sound. He reached a clearing just in time to see Axel step onto a stool and grasp the rope.

A similar sensation to that horrible day crept up his spine. The sound of taut fabric stretched in his mind, and the snap of scissors loomed ominously, as if readying itself to sever another thread.

Luke's heart loudly pounded in his ears, making him move so fast he was little more than a blur. He collided with Axel's chest, swiftly bringing him down to the ground and ending up on top of him. With urgency, he pulled Axel away from the faux-innocent swaying rope hanging overhead.

The sensation lingered briefly, like cold fingers brushing and tightening around his neck. Luke wondered if he was going crazy, but the feeling seemed almost accusatory. Just as suddenly as it had come, it left, leaving him disoriented and very, *very* angry.

Without thinking, Luke harshly slapped the older man's non-scarred cheek and screamed at his face, "The fuck you think you're doing?"

Stunned, Axel lifted one of his hands to hold his reddening cheek, the mark of Luke's hand clear against the older demigod's pale skin. With no warning, Axel burst into tears.

After he managed to calm down a bit, the man miserably murmured, "We were supposed to go together."

“Don’t be ridiculous.” He answered harshly, not letting the older man stand up in fear of the guy trying to kill himself again. “Aubrey wouldn’t want you to waste away your life because of her.”

Luke had no idea of what to do. His mind kept churning out ways to help, but none seemed to be what the man needed. Feeling completely useless, he supposed he should call Mr. D, but even that, he didn’t know how to do.

"Aubrey..." Axel's feeble whisper drew Luke's attention away from his own desperate frustration and back to the dire situation at hand. The pale demigod breathed heavily, stuttering, "It's my fault. I-I should have dreamed sooner, but it was so... *so* hard. I was too weak."

"Dream?" The blonde blurted out, instantly regretting it as he saw the older man's face twist with renewed anguish.

Before he could correct his mistake, Axel began to explain, his eyes fixed on a point above Luke's head. "My father is the god of sleep. I thought...maybe I could contact someone to help us while I slept. But I wasn't able to reach anyone until you." He managed a humorless smile. "Too late. If only I had known sooner..."

"Listen." The younger demigod ordered loudly, capturing the older man's attention. "I don't know what happened, but don't crucify yourself for my sister's choices."

Axel remained silent for a moment, staring at Luke in an unsettling manner, before muttering in a slightly puzzled tone, "Why don't you blame me like Edward does?"

"Because I knew my sister." Luke said simply. "She wouldn't have let you die in her place. She would want you to live, to see the world, and achieve all your dreams."

“Dreams…” Axel sighed, closing his eyes. “We had so many dreams.”

"You still have them." Luke retorted firmly, standing up quickly and extending a hand to the older man. "If you prefer, think of it this way: fulfill all those dreams in Aubrey's place."

Hesitating for a moment, Axel shook his head but accepted Luke’s hand, rising to his feet with unsteady legs. Then, he repeated softly, his voice steadier, "In Aubrey’s place..."

Discreetly, Luke kicked the stool away while the older man appeared lost in thought, causing it to roll into a nearby bush and disappear from view.

With a renewed spark in his eyes, Axel approached Luke and began rummaging through his clothes. When he found what he was looking for, he held it close to his heart for a moment, then hesitated briefly before extending his hand. Whispering as if it caused him pain, he disclosed quietly, "She wanted you to have this."

Accepting the offering, Luke observed it was a bracelet, one of those metal ones that could be decorated with pendants. This one already had a charm attached—a paw print, which Luke

guessed his sister had chosen for him because of Pipo. Exhaling shakily, he slid it onto his wrist, quietly wondering how long she must have saved to buy him this precious gift.

Blinking away his tears, Luke steeled himself and offered a hand to Axel, who still looked so very raw. Dragging the other demigod along, Luke guided them out of the dark woods until they emerged into the open, sunlit area outside.

The sunlight seemed to work wonders for his mood, and glancing back at Axel, Luke noticed it had a positive effect on him too. Still, he wasn't ready to leave the older man alone just yet.

Luke *really* needed to talk to Mr. D.

Frankly, there were many things he needed to do, since it felt like everything in his life was going wrong.

Maybe the Fates were laughing at him.

Shaking his head, Luke gestured for Axel to keep following him as he led them towards the Big House. However, the sound of thread and the snap of scissors continued to echo in his mind.

Chapter End Notes

Travis and Connor Stoll finally arrived, which triggered Luke's maternal instincts, no matter what Hermes' intentions were. And what a woman Ms. Stoll is, attracting a god twice, what with her kids being one year apart in age.

Ed reverted back to his rival mindset. An opportunist, this man is, which does not bode well for Luke at all. Meanwhile, Abigail left, and then there is the fact that she inherited Hermes' Underworld god aspect. The shadow travel thing, which I saw somewhere but don't remember where, was magic, pure magic, and that means that Hecate and Hermes' kids could do it too. It just made sense: Hermes, guide of the dead, being able to travel through shadows and stuff.

Poor Axel, he's not fine at all. He didn't take his girlfriend's death well, and with Edward blaming him, it took a toll on our pale man. In a lighter note, we have his father's reveal, Hypnos, which I thought was already pretty obvious at this point. For Luke, now he has to keep an eye on the guy, take care of his new brothers, and deal with the cabin faction war stirring up again. So yeah, not good times ahead.

Thanks for reading! Your comments are always appreciated! I read and cherish every single one! ♥♥♥

# Chapter 17: Teenhood - Pine Tree

Chapter Summary

She's finally here

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Did you have to bring the babies?" Lee asked, frowning at the Stoll brothers, who stood beside Luke, each holding onto one of his hands.

"I'm not a baby!" Travis complained, glaring at the golden-haired boy. "Connor is, though."

Connor whipped his head around and glared at the other brat, huffing indignantly. He muttered some quite unpleasant things under his breath, leaving Luke to wonder how and from whom he had learned such language.

"I couldn't leave them alone." Luke replied wearily, feeling completely and utterly exhausted.

His little brothers were now officially recognized as such. Their claiming occurred much like his own: on the same day they arrived and during the dinner food offering. What shocked everyone wasn't how quickly they were claimed, but the fact that they were full-blooded siblings, and not twins, no matter how similar they looked.

Rumors began to circulate around Camp Half-Blood about Ms. Stoll and what she was like to have caught Hermes' attention twice. After a little interrogation the day before, when the kids had arrived, Luke personally suspected she might be some kind of big-shot criminal, especially given Connor's words about their lack of a permanent home.

But, alas, the reason he couldn't leave them alone was because of Ed. Who knew what kind of bad influence his older brother might have on such impressionable young children?

"I see." Lee mused with curiosity, examining the kids in a way that made Luke think he was wondering if they were really that much of a handful.

"You don't, but you will. Just wait." Luke sighed dramatically, going along with the assumption. The best part was, it wasn't even a lie.

It hadn't even been a full day since the children arrived, and they had already shot arrows into Chiron's butt—which Luke was quite certain was intentional—tried to set fire to the forest, and stolen something from the Ares cabin. The latter incident was brought to Luke's attention by an irate Peter, who kept blurting out the word 'honor' every two seconds, which only made it harder for Luke to take him seriously.

In the end, he still didn't know what the Stoll brothers had taken or where they had hidden it, as they weren't telling anyone.

Lee stifled a laugh, then quickly coughed when the kids shot him suspicious looks.

"Well, I can't wait to see it then." He said, his eyes glinting with amusement. Straightening up, he gestured grandly towards the volleyball court behind him. "Shall we have a little game in the meantime? A bit of de-stressing from the dangers of demigod life and all that."

“I guess.” Luke mused. “Just don’t expect me to be that much of a challenge.”

"You're not that bad." The other boy retorted kindly, though Luke couldn't help but notice Lee didn't say he was good either.

Huffing mischievously, he let go of his brothers’ hands and flicked the son of Apollo’s forehead as he passed by. He quickly scurried away when the golden-haired demigod let out a playful war cry and began chasing him across the open space.

Luke effortlessly stayed out of Lee’s reach, snatching the ball from the center of the court as he ran by. With a smooth motion, he tossed it behind him and took his position on the other side of the net.

“You’re not that bad of a runner either.” Luke echoed the other boy’s words, taunting Fletcher with a smirk as he paraded smugly across the center line.

Easily catching the ball mid-air, Lee grinned crookedly and glanced at Luke with a hint of fondness in his gaze. "You really can't stand not having the last word, can you?"

Completely disregarding the other remarks, the older demigod raised his chin and declared, "If we're going to do this, we're including my brothers."

Immediately, Lee’s face soured, and he shot a slightly scathing look at the two children watching them curiously from the sidelines. The reaction made Luke’s hackles rise in response.

The kids might not be the most skilled at the game, being so young, but they were here and would be treated well; may the Lord hear his words.

"Do you have any complaints, *Lee Fletcher*?" Luke asked, his tone making it very clear there was only one answer he would like to hear.

"Yes. I mean, no!" Lee stuttered clumsily, wilting under the blonde's chastising glare. Clearing his throat awkwardly, he continued with a sheepish tone that Luke found somewhat exaggerated for the situation at hand. "It's just...you know, they're little kids, and well, I wanted—" He cut himself off, shook his head, and backtracked. "It doesn't matter. How should we divide the teams?"

Sparing Lee a curious glance, Luke called over the two hellions, placing a hand on each of their heads as he spoke. "Let them choose between us." He suggested. Turning to his

brothers, Luke quickly explained, "Boys, we're dividing into two teams: mine and his. Take your pick."

Faster than anyone could react, Connor latched onto Luke and exclaimed, “I choose big brother!”

“No fair!” Travis argued petulantly. “I didn’t even have time to think!”

With a pompous look that had no business appearing in a child’s face, Connor retorted, “Think faster then.”

"Be nice to your brother, zero two." Luke interjected before a fight could break out between the two kids. In a soothing voice, he turned to the other brat, "Zero one, since you're the older one, how about you show us what a big boy you are by trying to win against us?”

With his feathers now smoothed down, Travis nodded excitedly, throwing a smug glance at Connor before strutting over to stand beside Lee.

How simple his little brother was—it was adorable.

Both team leaders walked to the center and played rock-paper-scissors to determine who would serve the ball first. Perhaps his luck wasn't with him these days, because Lee won quite easily against Luke, both in securing the first serve and in the actual volleyball game, winning three times in a row.

*Stupid children of Apollo with their fucking eagle eyes, and their stupid superhuman marksmanship,* Luke thought testily as he lay on the ground, glaring at the clear, bright blue sky while trying to catch his breath.

Soon, the aforementioned annoying son of Apollo appeared in his line of vision, a grin spreading across the amber-eyed boy’s face as he tried to hide his amusement.

"We can't all be good at everything." He offered, plopping down beside Luke.

Luke clicked his tongue in annoyance. He shot a mockingly affected look at his friend before rolling over and turning his back toward him. Lee laughed and playfully poked his sides, which Luke promptly slapped away.

"Don't pout. You're better than me at most things. Let me have one thing I'm better than you at for once." Lee teased with a snicker, quickly pulling his hand away before it could be slapped a second time.

"Better? 'Better' doesn't quite capture the humiliation I've just endured." Luke grumbled, but he rose to his elbows and shot Lee a skeptical look.

“Ah, you’re so dramatic.” Lee sighed fondly, shaking his head.

"Dramatic, my ass…" The older demigod muttered under his breath, but, apparently, his friend heard him, since it sparked a new fit of laughter from the golden-haired boy.

While Fletcher made a fool of himself beside him, Luke swiftly sat up and scanned the area for the Stoll brothers. He couldn't afford to be anything less than careful with these children. Fortunately, they appeared to be entertained with their little game of ball and weren't too far from his position, which made it infinitely easier to keep an eye on them.

He hoped Travis wouldn't rub his victory in Connor's face, or else Luke would have to step in before the argument turned physical.

"How are you feeling?" Lee's question drew Luke's attention back to the other demigod.

*How was he feeling?*

With his sister recently deceased, her boyfriend nearly following suit, another sister opting to run away, and his older brother plotting a coup, all while facing the imminent threat of canon hanging above his neck—well, ‘stressed’ would only scratch the surface of what he was feeling.

"Great. Can't you tell?" Luke stated dryly, flashing a fake smile at the other boy.

"Sorry, that was a stupid question." Lee replied sheepishly, rubbing the back of his neck. "What I meant was, are you feeling any better now?"

Luke’s face turned neutral as he pondered over the question. The last few days had been difficult, and he had mostly operated on adrenaline, with anxiety gripping his throat in a tight hold. But now, he felt somewhat at ease, even relaxed, if he could call it that.

"I suppose I am.” He mused, fixing his eyes on the playing children, feeling something inside his chest loosen at the sight.

"I'm glad.” Lee muttered softly, turning to watch the children as well. Almost as an afterthought, he sneakily added, "You know you can talk to me about anything, right? Even if it's just to vent."

With a noncommittal hum, the blonde considered the offer. He had already had a heart-to-heart talk with Dean a few days back, but now his friend was being kept busy by his mother. This left them with few opportunities to catch up, let alone discuss Luke’s problems.

However, he hesitated to burden a younger kid with his concerns. Despite Lee's mature demeanor and appearance, he was only twelve. Being fourteen himself—though if one counted his past life, he would be much older than that—Luke felt he should be the one offering to listen.

Glancing sideways, he noticed Lee staring at him with a serious expression, his chin jutting out stubbornly as if challenging the other demigod to ignore him.

Seeing the expression, Luke felt a brief urge to be contrary and do exactly what Lee didn’t want him to do. Yet, he reasoned it would be unproductive and childish—especially since he had just been thinking of himself as the more mature of the two.

Seeing no way out, he gave in.

"It's just...Edward.” Luke began hesitantly, avoiding eye contact. "He's being difficult."

"Difficult is an understatement." Lee huffed unkindly, his amber eyes narrowing. "He's acting like an asshole. Isn't he, like, nineteen? Why is he still hanging around here? Shouldn’t he be off at college or something?"

Honestly, Luke didn’t know the answer either. Most demigods left as soon as they came of age, heading off to college or trying to lead a normal life—well, as normal as life could be for half-god spawn, anyway.

Cases like Aubrey’s were rare; those who did stay on as counselors after reaching adulthood often attended college and didn't stay year-round like the younger campers.

Edward was an anomaly.

With a shrug, he asked, "Does it really matter?"

"It could." Lee insisted, gesturing wildly. "What if we could force him out?"

"Good luck with that." Luke snorted dismissively, leaning back on his elbows. With a brooding tone, he confessed, "I wouldn’t even mind if he were the counselor if he wasn’t so prejudiced.” Glancing at the younger boy, he added, “I don’t know how much the other cabins hear, but the situation with the unclaimed is explosive at best. And Ed is the match ready to set it all on fire."

“We hear a little, but I can’t say I understand how your dynamics work.” The younger boy admitted. “It seems complicated.”

With a half-smile, Luke mused, “Complicated…that doesn’t even begin to cover it.” He held his face with one hand and turned to Lee, explaining, “For example, yesterday, there was a whole mess over which two poor kids had to give up their beds for my new brothers. You might say, ‘Luke, that’s not fair!’ and I’d agree, but that’s how Cabin Eleven operates. The actual children of the Messenger get the first pick on everything. You know, privilege and all that. Plus, there’s always the looming threat of my father stepping in if he feels the hospitality law has been broken—*xenia*, just like the good old days.”

“That’s…” Lee looked startled, unable to finish his sentence.

“A pain in my butt? Yes.” Luke concluded, settling back on the ground to stare at the sky. “Ed’s already taking over my responsibilities, and with his long list of completed quests compared to my none, there’s not much I can do. And then there's Abigail—she ran away.”

Lee whipped his head around, staring at Luke in total shock. “She ran away?”

"Yeah." Luke confirmed, his expression briefly twisting before he added, "We're keeping it quiet. Mr. D and Chiron are trying to find her."

Taking a peek at the younger boy’s dumbfounded face, Luke questioned if he should have shared his problems at all. It wasn’t something he liked to do, but once he had started, the

words kept flowing. Surprisingly, he felt a bit better about everything now that he had shared the situation with someone completely unrelated to it.

"I can't even imagine the pressure you're under." Lee said, turning to him with furrowed brows. "Sorry for asking."

Luke clicked his tongue, rolling his eyes. “You didn’t force me to talk, boy.”

Lee's whole expression twitched at being called 'boy,' and with a hint of annoyance in his tone, he grumbled, "I'm only two years younger than you."

"Two years too many." The older demigod replied casually, sitting up again to check on his brats, who were still entertained by the ball. Clearing his throat awkwardly, Luke continued, "Thank you for listening." Grimacing slightly, he added, "I *do* feel better now."

Smiling softly, Lee responded by giving the blonde's hair a playful tug.

Out of nowhere, a round projectile flew through the air at high speed, striking Lee right in the forehead and causing the amber-eyed kid to flop down onto the ground.

Startled, Luke turned his head towards the Stoll brothers, who were arguing as they ran over to him.

“You have very bad aim.” Connor noted.

"Shut up! Like you could do any better!" Travis shot back stubbornly, stepping on Lee's chest to retrieve the ball, causing the golden-haired boy to wheeze.

Luke pinched his nose and asked, exasperated, "Please, tell me, why did you throw the ball toward us?"

"We were trying to get your attention, big bro." Connor explained, gesturing toward the horizon. "We saw something coming here."

With a groan, Lee sat up after Travis had retreated to safety near Luke. Grinning through what seemed like pain, the son of Apollo unexpectedly praised, "You've got quite an arm, kid. Maybe a future with javelins, or even bows. But first, let's work on your aim..."

"Javelins?" Travis almost squealed. Soon after, his brows furrowed in confusion as he realized he didn’t know what they were. "What are javelins?

"What did you two see?" Luke interjected, reining in the conversation before it could go off track any further.

"Two dots on the horizon." Connor replied, pointing to what he was describing.

Squinting in that direction, Luke saw two figures running towards them, or perhaps to the Big House—it was hard to tell. They seemed agitated, sprinting from the cabins at an unexpected speed.

As they got closer, Luke recognized Dean and Pipo—an unlikely pair since the satyr didn't exactly enjoy the dog's company.

But if they were together...

"Travis, Connor, go to the Big House." Luke ordered, standing up in one smooth motion, his eyes never leaving the approaching figures.

Something bad was happening. And for all that was holy in this world, he wouldn't let his brothers near it.

The kids began to protest, but one firm look from their older brother made them comply. Just in time, too—as soon as they entered the Big House, Dean arrived, looking panicked. His pupils had reverted to goat-like slits, and his eyes were shifting restlessly. The hellhound at his heels circled them, growling in agitation, and pointed his snout insistently at the Camp barriers.

No matter how angry Luke was at Pipo, he wasn't stupid enough to ignore the dog's behavior, especially after Aubrey.

"What's wrong?" Luke asked, supporting the trembling satyr as he struggled to stay upright. Dean panted in short, rapid breaths, his wide eyes suggesting he was on the brink of a panic attack.

"Monsters!" Dean managed to squeak out, gripping the younger boy's arm desperately. "A whole horde of them!"

Pipo howled and barked in rapid succession, his eyes wide enough to reveal the whites around them.

“Did you alert Chiron? Or Mr. D?” Lee inquired urgently.

"I couldn't find them." The satyr lamented. "I searched all over Camp, but my nose is clogged with the scent of monsters." Dean shuddered. "There are so many of them..."

"Have the monsters arrived already?" Luke asked, glancing towards the direction of the barriers that protected Camp Half-Blood, scanning for any sign of an intruder. "Did you alert the cabins? We need everyone ready to fight, and the younger ones need to hide."

"No, but they're close and getting closer." Dean replied shakily. Steadying himself, he continued, "I've warned them, but not everyone was there.”

"Go to the Big House. Chiron might be there. Find the horn and sound the alert throughout Camp." Luke commanded, marching towards the cabins with Lee following closely. Pausing, he glanced back and said firmly, "My brothers are there. Don't let them out, no matter what."

Dean opened his mouth to protest but then closed it, briefly shutting his eyes. When he reopened them, his pupils had returned to normal, and he nodded firmly.

"You can trust me.”

Giving the satyr one last nod, Luke pivoted and sprinted towards Cabin Eleven. As they neared, he heard Lee break away, undoubtedly heading to warn his own siblings.

Without slowing down, Luke violently slammed open the doors of his cabin, startling the few campers who had chosen to relax there that afternoon. Cursing, he marched to his bed and grabbed his bronze sword, the one he rarely used anymore since Camp was supposed to be safe.

"Why are you sitting there uselessly? A horde of monsters is coming!" Luke screamed at the disoriented and confused kids.

"What? Monsters can't enter Camp Half-Blood! There are magical barriers." One of them objected weakly, prompting all the other demigods to protest one after another until their voices merged into a grand chorus of denial.

“Silence!” Luke shouted furiously.

The quietness that followed his outburst would have been satisfying if the situation wasn't so dire.

"Didn't you hear the satyr scream about the monsters coming? Do any of your noses work better than his?" Luke continued harshly, slamming his sword on the ground for emphasis. "No? Then shut up and prepare!" Pointing as he spoke, he commanded, "You, go find the other campers and spread the news. You, gather the young ones and take them to the Big House. The rest of you, get ready for a fight."

As soon as he finished speaking, the sharp blast of the horn pierced the air, adding to the campers' already frantic movements around the room.

"No need to warn the others now! Go, get your armor and weapons!" Luke exclaimed over his shoulder as he rushed outside.

"Yes, counselor!" Came the chorus of voices, hurrying to prepare.

Outside, chaos reigned. Demigods sprinted back to their cabins in a frenzy, colliding with each other like a bunch of clumsy drunks, while others hastily armored themselves. A group of slightly older demigods from various cabins guided the younger children to safety.

Meanwhile, the girl who always tended to the central campfire observed the chaos with sorrowful eyes. Luke knew her true identity—Hestia—but he had never engaged her in conversation. At most, he nodded in greeting, which she always returned warmly.

Today, however, she appeared miserable.

Pushing aside the nagging voice warning him that a sorrowful goddess of hearth was a bad omen, Luke rushed towards the barriers, aware of Lee joining him more by sound than sight.

As he reached the outskirts of Camp territory, he saw it—a sight that made his blood run cold. Almost as if underwater, Luke faintly heard Lee whisper in fear, "By the gods... there are too many."

Ahead of them, on the other side of the hill, a horde of monsters sprawled farther than Luke could count, advancing like a grotesque mass toward them. Though distant, near the horizon, their sheer numbers made it appear as if the entire horizon teemed with them. Among the creatures were numerous hellhounds, each larger and more menacing than Pipo, cyclopes, unfamiliar creatures that Luke thought resembled demons, and even the Furies.

*The time had come.*

With a shiver, Luke scanned the area desperately, searching for whom he thought the monsters were chasing. Anxiety grew the longer he failed to spot them, but then he saw it: three figures struggling to run towards their position.

At this distance, Luke couldn't see their features clearly, but he recognized Grover with his half-goat body leading a little blonde girl by the hand. Behind them, an older girl, around twelve years old with black hair, limped and occasionally turned back. She raised her spear, summoning lightning that incinerated the faster monsters catching up to them. Moments later, the thunder echoed through the space, causing the other creatures to hesitate in their approach.

"The daughter of Zeus." Lee whispered in recognition, his face draining of color as the sky flashed with lightning at his words.

The King was watching.

Before long, other campers arrived, coming to a stop and staring in disbelief at the immense monster horde approaching them. Yet, none of them took action. Despite being fully armored and armed demigods, they were still children, lacking the numbers to do anything but face potential massacre if they chose to fight.

One by one, the campers began to recognize Thalia as the daughter of Zeus. Soon, whispers spread among them, suggesting that she was the reason for the attack on their home.

He couldn’t believe this.

"We need to help them!" Luke exclaimed, glaring at the demigods around him.

"Why?" A voice shouted back. "They want the forbidden child. Let them have her! Then they'll leave!"

A chorus of affirmations echoed through the group. They were all scared, their courage tested by the sheer number of monsters at their home's doorstep—Luke could understand that.

But to condemn one of their own, a child, to death because of it?

They were demigods—what else did they have besides each other? Their divine parents rarely interacted with them, and their mortal parents could never fully understand them.

Luke opened his mouth to retort, but before he could, a high-pitched, pained shriek pierced the air. Whirling around, he saw the little girl—*Annabeth, it was Annabeth*—fall to the

ground, clutching her ankle. Grover nervously circled her, trying to urge her to stand, but he was too thin and too small to carry her to safety.

The monsters closed in on them, circling the group with bloodthirsty eagerness.

Thalia summoned lightning once more, disintegrating some of them and raising her shield to drive the rest away from the younger girl. But even she couldn't hold them off for long; for every monster she killed, two more appeared to take its place.

With guilt flooding his veins—*it was his fault, his fault*—Luke watched their desperate struggle for survival, so painfully close to safety.

Then, he made a decision—a stupid one, one he regretted even before he acted on it.

But he owed them this.

Taking a deep breath, Luke steadied his trembling hands and began to walk toward the barrier, shrugging off Lee who looked at him with confusion, trying to ask what he was doing.

Just before he could cross it, someone seized his arms harshly.

"And where do you think you're going?" Ed hissed, his face a mix of worry and fury as he loomed over his younger brother.

"To do what none of you cowards have the guts to do." Luke shot back, equally aggressive.

"You mean risking your life?" Edward demanded. "I won't allow it."

"Why do you even care? Weren't you happy enough to throw our sister's death in my face yesterday?" Luke retorted, violently shoving his brother’s chest as he wrenched his arms free from his grip.

Ed recoiled, giving the younger demigod just enough time to pivot and sprint, crossing the barrier as he heard his brother's panicked voice cry out his name.

In moments, he had reached Grover, who nearly cried tears of relief upon seeing him.

“Luke! Thank the gods!”

Taking a moment to pat the other boy on the shoulder, Luke assessed the fallen girl. Her ankle appeared swollen and red, but not so severely that she couldn't walk. Yet, it was clear she wouldn’t be able to run.

"Help the girl up and get her to the barrier. I'll handle the monsters and make sure none of them get past to attack you." Luke instructed, examining the threat.

Dozens of hellhounds, each the size of cars, prowled nearby, while unknown creatures circled above. However, their attention was currently diverted by Thalia, who valiantly held them off.

Luke wasn't certain how long she could keep it up.

Taking a deep breath, he forced a confident smile. It seemed to reassure Grover, who nodded and moved to support the visibly shaken Annabeth.

In truth, Luke was fucking terrified, but he couldn't let it show to these kids. They were relying on him.

He quickly advanced to the line of monsters, appearing beside Thalia just in time to cut down a hellhound that was lunging at her torso. She had stumbled, reacting too slowly, and, judging by the size of the beast's jaw, the bite would have torn her in half.

"What?" The girl exclaimed, her electric blue eyes locking with his in surprise. Then, shaking off the shock, she warned him, "Careful! Those demons above swoop down every now and then to try their luck when the hellhounds aren't trying to eat us."

"Got it." Luke grunted, dodging another lunge, this time directed at him. Before he could finish off the oversized dog, Thalia pierced it with her spear. She winked at him, but his attention was on something above her. Swirling his sword, he sliced through a creature diving straight at the girl's head.

Soon, they were cutting through the monsters together.

Thalia summoned lightning, finishing off dozens at a time, while Luke covered her during the moments she was drained from using her powers. He moved swiftly, appearing and reappearing on the battlefield, striking down creatures before they could even react, turning them into dust.

How much time had passed? Luke didn't know. All he knew was that he had to keep slashing.

He heard the sounds of multiple battles in the distance, almost as if in a dream, but paid little attention to them.

Vaguely, he noticed that he was covered in golden dust, and the ground shimmered beneath him.

Perhaps he had become too distracted, because a flying monster seized the opportunity to attack.

Cursing himself for his lapse in attention, Luke tried to lift his blade, but it was too late. The creature's claws pierced his shoulder, causing excruciating pain, like dozens of fishing hooks being driven into his flesh and tearing through the muscle.

Tears streamed from his eyes due to the pain, but Luke managed to grab the creature and throw it to the ground, driving his sword into it until it disintegrated.

Gritting his teeth, he glanced around and found Thalia surrounded by hellhounds. Stumbling toward her, he watched as the air filled with the smell of ozone and lightning crackled through it, jumping from one beast to another until they all turned to dust.

Luke quickened his steps with difficulty, catching Thalia just before she collapsed. She had overused her powers, and it showed in her pale and exhausted complexion.

As the two of them struggled to stand, the monsters began to surround them again, some breaking away toward Grover and Annabeth.

Closing his eyes tightly, Luke heard Grover's goat-like scream as the satyr noticed the monsters approaching.

"Boy." Thalia called out, drawing his attention. Now close enough to see the scars on her arms and face, Luke wondered if they had been there in canon—or, with a pang of guilt hitting his chest, if they were the result of his own actions. Shaking his head, he hesitantly met her unwavering gaze. Thalia raised her spear, summoning increasing torrents of electricity that made it hard to look at her, and silently mouthed as she kicked him away, "Take her to safety."

Before he could utter a protest, a brilliant blue light burst forth, disintegrating countless hordes of monsters before his eyes.

Reluctantly, Luke turned away and ran toward Annabeth with increasing urgency, rapidly cutting through the monsters in his path despite the searing pain in his shoulder, biting his tongue to keep from screaming.

Spotting the girl and Grover, who both watched with wide, fearful eyes as lightning continued to skewer through the creatures, Luke tossed his sword aside and accelerated, swiftly leaning down to scoop up the child in one fluid motion.

The instant he did so, the light vanished.

Glancing back for a moment, Luke saw Thalia, barely standing, being surrounded by so many hellhounds that she was no longer visible.

When the pain-filled screams began, Luke pressed Annabeth's head against his chest as he ran faster, chanting softly, "Don't look, girl, don't look," while she shouted, cried, and pounded his chest with her tiny fists.

"Thalia! You have to save Thalia!" Annabeth sobbed repeatedly, her pleas causing him more agony than his ruined shoulder.

*I want to. I want to. But I can't.*

As soon as he crossed the barrier, he crumpled to the ground, the adrenaline fading even though he still felt on high alert, clutching his charge tightly against his chest.

All Luke knew was the desperate need to protect and the exhaustion seeping on his bones.

Blurry hands reached into his field of vision, pulling at him urgently, while others tried to pry Annabeth away. He snarled and held onto her fiercely, only easing up when a familiar voice began chanting in Ancient Greek. A warm, glowing hand touched his shoulder, chasing the pain away.

The thunderous sound echoing through the sky caused the irritating hands to retreat.

Struggling to lift his head, Luke witnessed a bolt of lightning streak down from the sky toward the horde of hellhounds, momentarily blinding him. When his vision cleared, the monsters were gone, replaced by a solitary tree atop the hill.

Chapter End Notes

Connor and Travis are the proto pranksters, but still very much hellions. Really, Connor is undoubtedly the mastermind behind each plan; he should be the zero one, but, alas, he's the youngest. And Ms. Stoll, the mystery of who she is and what she does is ever present. Certainly, she doesn't do anything good if Hermes went to her twice. Our celebrity, Peter Wu, didn't make an appearance, but the mention is already iconic enough, with the 'honor' of his cabin being tested by two brats.

Here, Lee tries to distract Luke and show he is trustworthy, while Luke is like, 'Kid, you're a thousand years too early to hear my problems,' and then proceeds to tell him anyway. But we should give credit where credit is due; this boy is loyal.

And... Thalia and Annabeth. I tried to make it impactful, showing Luke's leadership skills and how much he cares about people, even if he is scared, very, very scared. The guy has strong self-preservation instincts, but he's also responsible and the kind of person who gets attached to others and places; one only needs to see how hesitant he was to leave his mother's house for this statement to ring true.

Thalia still got turned into a tree; The Fates aren't playing around. But in my head, the girls' journey was rougher, and they became a lot more scarred, both mentally and physically.

And then Luke becomes feral. The stress finally got to him, and then add a fragile and hurt kid to the mix...

Thanks for reading! I'd love to hear your thoughts about this chapter! Each and every comment is appreciated and cherished very much! ♥♥♥

# Chapter 18: Teenhood - Comfort

Chapter Summary

Mr. D finds out what happened and Annabeth is not okay

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Pray, tell me, what were you thinking?" Mr. D inquired pleasantly, elegantly swirling his Diet Coke as he fixed his gaze on the cowering demigod before him, his blue eyes slowly becoming purple.

"I...I couldn't just watch and do nothing." Luke stuttered weakly, his hands clasped tightly in his lap.

A few days after the monster horde appeared at their borders, Mr. D returned to Camp Half-Blood. As soon as he arrived, Dean recounted everything that had happened in his absence, with *excruciating* detail—which Luke was quite certain was a petty retaliation to his impulsive actions that day.

And *that* led to this meeting.

Sighing heavily, Mr. D closed his eyes in exasperation. He then set his drink gently on the table between them, the soft clink echoing like a slam in Luke's ears.

"You could have." The god corrected with a disinterested hum, though the blonde wasn't fooled by it at all. "You simply chose not to, and for what? To fail to save one girl and have the other furious at you for it."

Luke couldn't help but flinch at the sharp observation.

"And you chose to perform that little *heroic* act precisely when I wasn't at Camp, while I was busy searching for *your* missing sister." Mr. D continued pointedly, leaning back in his armchair. "I didn't take you for such a fool."

Cautiously, Luke lifted his eyes to examine the god's expression. Dionysus appeared carefully neutral, perhaps even serious—a clear sign to the boy that the director was angry.

"They're just children. I saw them struggling and simply…acted." Luke offered tentatively, wincing at how weak it sounded, even to his own ears.

Unimpressed, Mr. D countered, "Are you responsible for them? What if that little stunt of yours didn't work out?"

Luke paused abruptly, pondering how to answer to the question in a way the director would find acceptable.

But, maybe, his silence seemed incriminating, prompting Dionysus to speak first.

"You see, when my mother insisted on seeing my father's true form while I was still in her womb, she ended up being burned to ashes. Maybe a normal child wouldn't have felt it or been aware of it, but I did. I felt it. A terrible, all-consuming pain, and then I died. My father took me from her corpse and sewed me into his thigh. I was born again a few months later, a demigod like you." Mr. D recounted, fixing Luke with an unblinking gaze. He then asked, "Do you understand why I'm telling you this?"

"Because dying isn't…fun?" Luke guessed, tilting his head innocently, though internally he was sweating.

*Did he know?*

Humming softly, Dionysus maintained his silence for a few moments, studying the demigod before him with such intensity that it made the boy shuffle uncomfortably in his seat.

Eventually, Mr. D remarked, "Yes, that is one of the reasons. For most mortals, dying is both terribly painful and final." Crossing his legs with elegance, he continued, "So, Luke Castellan, refrain from such reckless actions in the future. You might not be so lucky to escape *again*."

Brushing aside his unease born from the god's words, which seemed unhelpful in the current situation, Luke murmured his agreement in a quiet voice, "Yes, Mr. D."

Internally, he *knew* he wouldn't be able to avoid danger.

With Thalia now turned into a tree, mirroring the events from the books, everything seemed destined to unfold in the same manner as canon. Not to mention the strange connection to fate he possessed, which he still didn't understand, though he had some suspicions he preferred not to think too deeply about.

However, one thing was certain: if he wanted to survive past twenty-three, he had no choice but to act.

Almost absentmindedly, Luke lifted his hand to touch the skin beneath his right eye.

Could he avoid *that* too?

"Well." Mr. D began, pulling the blonde from his spiraling thoughts. "The damage is already done. You saved Annie Bell, even if she remains unappreciative of your efforts. Your actions inspired some of the young heroes here to follow your lead into stupidity, filling the infirmary with whiny brats and disturbing my peace and quiet." For a split second, the god's face contorted into a grimace. "And you've managed to…*impress* the other gods."

"Impress...the other gods?" Luke echoed, his face gradually paling as the implications of that statement sank in.

"Congratulations, brat." Dionysus drawled dryly, taking a sip of his drink, though the irritated twist of his lips was still noticeable. "You've got some of them paying attention to you now."

“I’m honored…?” Luke stated uncertainly, feeling anything but honored.

It was always a bad thing to attract a god’s attention.

Navigating through Mr. D's interest was already a challenge, and his father's particular brand of insanity proved to be even worse.

But to have even more deities watching him? It felt like his own personal version of hell.

Dionysus clicked his tongue and rolled his eyes, his tone firm as he said, "Boy, enough with the pretending. We've gone over this multiple times before. If you have something to say, say it clearly. Besides, I already know you don't like it, and frankly, I don't like it either."

Tightening his grip on his hands, Luke stared at the table in silence. Then, in a subdued voice, he asked directly, "What will change?"

"Nothing, as long as I have any say in it." Mr. D retorted, his gaze bearing down on Luke like a physical weight. "I'm the director of this place, and even though it's neutral ground for all the gods, my position still carries some weight."

"But outside—" Luke began, only to be cut off.

"You won't be going outside." Dionysus interjected sharply, his purple eyes glowing with power as the flame of madness within them seemed to flicker with increasing intensity.

Abruptly lifting his head to meet the god’s gaze head-on, Luke ignored the fear that chilled his blood and the rapid pounding of his heart, which raced like that of a frightened rabbit, and protested, “But, Mr. D, I still need to go on a quest!”

Ignoring the boy, the god raised one hand and snapped his fingers.

A wave of divine power washed over Luke, reminding him of days spent on the beach with his once-family in the *before*, where the relentless waves of the sea tested the steadiness of his legs with unfaltering patience, pushing and pulling at him insistently.

Suddenly, the sensation quieted, settling over his skin like a perfectly fitted outfit, so natural that it would go unnoticed by anyone but him.

"What is this?" He asked urgently, tentatively rubbing his arm with one hand, but his probing fingers only met his own skin.

It was like there was nothing there, but Luke *knew* something foreign was on him.

Mr. D observed his reaction with plain curiosity, leaning forward as he studied the demigod intently, his chin resting in his hand.

"How *curious*..." The god muttered, his eyes wide and gleaming with the alertness of a cat discovering something incredibly intriguing. Then, he visibly shook himself out of his bemusement, leaning back nonchalantly as if nothing unusual had occurred and answering, "I simply ensured you'll obey your punishment. And believe me, I'll know if you attempt to ignore it."

“Punishment?” Luke repeated dumbly.

Looking quite amused, Mr. D clarified, “It means you’re grounded, young man.”

*Grounded*.

The indignity.

"You can't leave Camp Half-Blood without my permission. Not that you could before—none of you little brats can wander off without my say-so." Dionysus explained, looking thoroughly entertained by Luke's growing frustration. "But this little trick just makes it all the more…palpable."

"And what about my quest?" The boy insisted, his brows furrowing deeper as he stared at the amused god.

"Unfortunately, it seems it will have to wait." Mr. D replied with fake sympathy, waving his hand dismissively, causing his diet coke to vaporize in the process. Standing up, the god walked away with all the grace of a feline—*and with all the arrogance of one too,* Luke added unkindly in his mind—remarking over his shoulder, "Now, scatter, Lucy. It's time for my afternoon nap."

Grudgingly, Luke stepped out of the Big House.

*Thank you, Mr. D, for making my life more difficult than necessary*, he thought irritably, walking aimlessly as his mind churned through many different plans in an effort to find a solution to his predicament.

Which he didn’t find—at least, not the kind of plan he would do without desperation forcing his hand.

He was on the verge of screaming his frustration to the heavens when he heard what sounded suspiciously like a fight, with Peter's voice rising above the commotion.

This instantly put him on high alert, since the combination of 'fight' and 'Peter' in the same sentence never meant anything good.

Luke hurried to the source of the noise, crossing the open plains near the cabins, only to witness a bizarre scene: the aforementioned teenager, his arm in a cast, shouting disapprovingly as Clarisse and Annabeth rolled on the ground, clawing at each other's faces and occasionally trading vicious bites.

"Clarisse! Not like that! Remember what I taught you!" Peter coached from the sidelines, his expression revealing dissatisfaction under the bandages and new scar splitting his brow. The

older demigod watched the catfight attentively, treating it more like a showdown between warriors than a squabble between young girls.

"What's going on here?" Luke interrupted, looming over the children with disapproval.

Immediately, they jumped as far apart as they could from each other, exchanging glares and pointedly ignoring him.

"A duel." Peter answered in their place, moving to stand beside Luke as they observed the kids begin to circle each other slowly. His voice carried a touch of emotion as he added, “It's Clarisse's first honor duel.”

Judgmentally, Luke side-eyed the son of Ares.

"What I meant," he said dryly, closing his eyes as he silently prayed for patience, "is why are they fighting, and why aren't you intervening?"

As if confused by the question, Peter blinked slowly, then replied like it were obvious.

"The daughter of my father’s rival provoked Clarisse. And it’s good character building."

Almost immediately after what the campers had dubbed The Event, Annabeth had been claimed.

It was expected, given Mr. D’s words and their implications—the gods had likely been closely watching that day. Additionally, in the books, her mother had cared enough to guide her with an owl toward Thalia, which Luke assumed was true here as well.

But he didn’t dare to ask her about it. She was still raw from that day, filled with anger toward everyone, and appeared to be avoiding Luke in particular. It would be the height of stupidity to broach such a personal topic with her now.

He couldn’t say he didn't understand her feelings. Yet, it frustrated him that she wouldn't let him get close enough to explain what Thalia had asked of him or that he hadn't abandoned her sister figure.

At least, not willingly.

“Provoked?” Luke prompted, ignoring the second part of Wu’s reply since it would be useless to try to understand how the battle-junkie’s mind worked.

Peter nodded gravely.

"She insulted our cabin, saying we weren't worthy to be called warriors because we let the King's daughter die.” The older teen explained seriously. "Clarisse reacted as a true daughter of War would and demanded a duel to defend our honor.”

Apparently, after Luke had crossed the barriers to attempt to save Thalia and Annabeth, some of the other demigods were inspired by his 'bravery' and 'strength of character,' as Wu put it, and began to advance against the monsters as well.

One of these campers had been Peter, which came as no surprise. When the son of Ares entered the fray, his cabin of bloodthirsty brutes followed, wreaking havoc on the battlefield.

Another had been Lee, accompanied by some of his siblings, who stayed closer to the barriers, along with a few of Luke's own roommates from Cabin Eleven.

Though they were few in number, they did their best, even if ultimately it wasn't enough. Despite not witnessing it due to being largely zoned out during the fight, it still warmed his heart with fuzzy feelings, though he would never admit it to anyone.

"A duel." Luke echoed dryly, casting a skeptical glance at the girls. "This."

"Not very impressive. Didn't even follow duel protocol. But, yes, a duel." Peter grumbled, his face twisting with displeasure as he observed Clarisse clumsily advancing against Annabeth, who rolled out of harm's way.

"And it's good for character building." The blonde repeated, his voice tinged with incredulity, though it seemed the other teen didn't notice.

"Yes." The son of Ares nodded solemnly. Then, with a hint of wistfulness, he added, "A pity the younglings couldn't stay to watch the fight that day. Clarisse could have learned a lot."

After giving Peter a critical once-over, Luke clicked his tongue and muttered as he strode over to the girls, "You really have problems."

With a smooth motion, he intervened and separated the wrestling girls, paying no heed to their enraged shrieks.

Placing them as far from each other as he could, Luke demanded as he stared them down, "Now, explain yourselves."

Predictably, a furious Clarisse was the first to complain.

"She said we were cowards!" She jabbed a finger at the sullen Annabeth, who glared daggers at her. "Even though Cabin Five was the only cabin that fought the horde with all our warriors!"

Turning to the aforementioned girl with a raised eyebrow, Luke studied her for a moment. She looked a bit scuffed up from the fight, though not as beaten up as expected given her smaller size and younger age. Her wavy honey-blonde hair stuck out in all directions, and her tan skin was dirtied from rolling on the ground. Most notably, her gray eyes seemed to hold a furious storm within them.

The scowl she directed at him brought an unpleasant memory of her brother to mind—a comparison he didn't find flattering, given his dislike for Ryan. Though her unfriendliness seemed more endearing than pompous, due to her age.

Ignoring her reaction, he questioned, "And what about you? What do you have to say for yourself?"

Annabeth lifted her nose into the air and replied slowly, as if explaining to someone simple-minded, "I *said* Cabin Five isn't as strong as they think they are if they couldn't even save one girl." Her eyes, both angry and suspiciously wet, locked onto his as she added confrontationally, "And I called *you* a coward for running away and leaving Thalia to die."

Luke's breath caught, and he instinctively recoiled, her blunt words hitting him like a slap.

In that brief moment of surprise, he couldn't react quickly enough to stop a screaming Clarisse from slamming the smaller kid into the ground, violently yanking her hair and pulling out blonde tufts in the process.

However, Annabeth wasn't taking it lying down; she fought back fiercely, shrieking and repeatedly slamming her fist into the older girl's face.

"No! Stop this, both of you!" He snapped out of his shock and exclaimed, grabbing the feral Clarisse, now with a black eye, under her arms and pulling her away from her victim toward her brother's side.

The older teen discreetly patted her on the head in approval, tilting his head in a perplexed manner when Luke gave him an accusing look.

Shaking his head, he decided to ignore Peter's behavior and prioritize Annabeth.

Turning back to the blonde girl, Luke assessed her state with a worried frown: her hair was even more disheveled, and tears streamed down her face, though she tried to maintain a brave face.

With a sigh, he crouched down to her level, meeting her gaze head-on. Extending his arm cautiously, as if tending to a frightened animal, he slowly lifted his hand to gently wipe away the tears and dirt from her face, allowing her plenty of time to avoid it if she wished.

Surprisingly, Annabeth didn't pull away.

Throughout the process, she kept her teary, angry eyes fixed on him, looking so very uncertain that it made his heart clench.

*Poor child.*

"Now, now. Everything's okay." Luke murmured soothingly, his touch gentle as he ran his hands through her hair, carefully undoing the knots as best as he could without a brush nearby.

"No." Annabeth sobbed, tears streaming down her face. "Nothing is okay! Thalia died!" Weakly, she slammed her fists repeatedly against his chest, and Luke allowed it, listening as she choked out between sobs, "Why? Why did you leave her?"

Hesitating, Luke glanced back at Peter, who narrowed his eyes and nodded decisively.

Without a word, Wu seized the back of Clarisse's shirt and firmly dragged the protesting, incensed child away, ensuring they were far enough from Luke and Annabeth that their

conversation would remain private.

"She…" He began, then cut himself off, willing the image of Thalia's last moments away from his head. Swallowing heavily, he continued, "She asked me to get you to safety."

This wasn't how he imagined revealing that to her.

Annabeth abruptly halted, lifting her head to lock eyes with him. Then, she whispered softly, "She did?"

Nodding gently, Luke affirmed, "Yes, she did."

"Why?" She sniffled, her small hands rubbing at her eyes. "Why didn't you make her come with you? Or go back to save her? You were so fast; there must have been something, *anything*, you could have done!"

"I'm sorry, Annabeth." He whispered quietly.

There was nothing more to say, nothing that the child would accept until she was ready.

"I don't want your apologies! I want Thalia!" She screamed, her voice cracking as she pounded his chest a few times. Then she collapsed, hugging her knees and wailing uncontrollably.

Luke allowed her to process her grief in silence for a few moments, holding his position without moving closer or farther away, even though his legs were growing uncomfortable from crouching for so long.

His own pain could wait. Annabeth needed this. And he feared that any wrong move on his part could irreparably shatter this fragile moment.

When her wails had been reduced to a few sniffles, Luke finally spoke.

"She cared about you a lot. Even though I didn't know her as well as you did, I could see that. She cared so much that she asked me, a total stranger, to take you to safety."

Annabeth cautiously lifted her head from where it was buried in her arms, her gray eyes peeking out, red and swollen from all the crying.

"She stayed behind to make sure you were safe. It doesn't make it okay, but know that you were cherished so, *so* much that Thalia did everything she could to protect you."

Annabeth bit her lip, her face contorting with a mix of emotions. She avoided eye contact, wiping her tear-streaked face with the back of her hand, even as a new wave of tears fell from her eyes.

They remained in silence for a few more minutes until she glanced at him tentatively and murmured, "I'm sorry...for hitting you."

"It's okay. I forgive you." Luke smiled in response.

Her tiny fists had barely caused any damage, but he figured it was best not to mention that—it might hurt her pride.

"And I'm sorry for saying those mean things." She added quickly, fidgeting with her hands. Then, averting her gaze, she whispered, "You're not a coward. Not really."

“I also think you’re quite brave.” He retorted warmly.

"It's just that—" She hesitated, then stared at him with her big eyes, confessing in a heartbreaking manner, "I'm alone now."

"You're not alone." Luke corrected firmly but kindly. "You have a cabin full of siblings and a Camp filled with demigods just like you, some even around your age."

Annabeth studied him with a penetrating gaze that hinted at the woman she would become—an impressive and incredibly clever demigod who would embark on numerous quests and, one day, save Olympus.

Not just once, but twice over.

"They let Thalia die." She snapped, her anger flaring up momentarily before she wilted again.

"Not all of them." He retorted, nodding toward the two children of Ares a little distance away.

Annabeth followed his gaze and made a face.

Internally, Luke rolled his eyes. Was the Athena and Ares rivalry already affecting her, even though she hadn't been here for even one full week?

Then again, in the books, she had been very *enthusiastic* about her mother. There was also the possibility of it being Ryan's influence, filling her head with unnecessary ideas about how a child of Athena should act.

Perhaps he should give her a little nudge.

"Give our campers a chance." Luke encouraged lightly, standing up and stretching his numb legs. "Who knows? Maybe they'll surprise you. And if it doesn't work out, at least you can say you tried."

"I don't want to forgive them.” She declared stubbornly, glaring at him in a way that was more cute than menacing.

"I'm not asking you to." The older demigod said patiently. "Just give it a try. It couldn't hurt, could it?"

She gave him another unnerving stare, then sighed as if she were an old woman humoring a request from a foolish young brat, and finally nodded, though in an incredibly grumpy manner.

“I’ll try.”

"Great!" Luke clapped his hands once, smiling down at her. Then, with a hint of craftiness, he suggested, "Why don't we start by apologizing to Clarisse?"

Annabeth shuffled uncomfortably for a moment, giving him a wide-eyed look. However, her pride still seemed to have some use as she visibly steeled herself, maybe unwilling to backtrack on her word, and stood up.

Slowly, Luke began to approach the two campers from Cabin Five, with a hesitant young girl following a short distance behind him.

When they finally reached them, he gently pushed Annabeth forward. Clarisse, grumpy and sporting a black eye, crossed her arms and sneered at the younger girl, though she quieted down when Peter laid a warning hand on her head.

"I'm sorry." Annabeth began, the apology sounding as if it were being painfully extracted from her by a pair of pincers.

Clarisse narrowed her eyes and said accusingly, "You don't sound very sorry."

Speaking slowly in an effort to sound sincere but not quite managing it, Annabeth repeated, "I said I'm sorry."

The older girl huffed, crossing her arms defiantly as she prepared to speak.

"What she means is that she is sorry for insulting Cabin Five and understands that you all did your best." Luke interjected quickly, keen to prevent the conversation from devolving into an argument or, worse, another fight.

"Yeah." Annabeth drawled, her tone dripping with insincerity. "What he said."

"How cute. Does Miss Princess need a hero to save her twice?" Clarisse taunted, stepping closer to loom over the blonde girl. Mockingly, she paused as if just considering it, "Oh, wait! You called your savior a coward for dragging your hide out of danger."

Watching Annabeth's expression fall and then flush red with fury, Luke prepared to intervene. However, before he could act, Peter gave his sister a slight slap on the head.

"Enough.” Wu commanded.

He turned his gaze to the blonde girl, who shrank under its weight. Luke couldn’t blame her —Peter was three times her size and width.

"You, daughter of my father's rival, have suffered greatly. We demigods know and share your pain, but your anger is misplaced." He stated solemnly. With no hint of gentleness, Peter continued, "Nothing could be done to save the King's daughter. We did everything we could. Your friend chose her fate, and you live because of it. Respect her choice and honor her. Perhaps then, you'll find peace."

Annabeth was too shocked to respond at first, staring at the son of Ares with incomprehension.

When his words finally sank in, she clenched her fists at her sides, biting her lip until it drew blood, her glare fixed fiercely on the older demigod. Then, she swiftly pivoted and fled, skillfully dodging Luke's attempts to stop her.

Turning to Peter, the blonde gave him a dirty look and said sarcastically, "Well done, Peter Wu, son of War. You've just managed to make a traumatized girl feel even worse."

“She cannot be coddled.” The bull-headed man answered bluntly. “I said what needed to be said, and the truth is often unkind. But this will help her win the battle within herself.” As if imparting great knowledge, he told Luke, “A warrior must have a balanced heart, spirit, and mind. Now, the daughter of Wisdom can achieve those steps more clearly. Then, maybe, she will become a better opponent for Clarisse.”

Rolling his eyes, Luke retorted, "What about your own sister’s behavior?"

"It will be corrected." Peter answered without missing a beat, shooting his arm out to grab the back of the girl’s shirt when she discreetly attempted to move away upon understanding what the two older demigods were discussing. Casting a glance at Luke, Wu pondered for a moment before suggesting, "Maybe you should seek out the girl. After all, you were the one who saved her. That has connected the two of you.”

Luke snorted humorlessly, realizing that whatever progress he had made with Annabeth had likely been undone by Wu's words.

"I doubt she's in the mood for company now."

"Or maybe you're wrong." The older teen stated bluntly. "You'll only find out if you go after your brat."

“My brat?” The blonde echoed skeptically, raising one eyebrow.

“Who else does she have?”

Before Luke could reply, Peter marched away, dragging his sister behind him.

Sighing, he gazed at the sky for a moment before shaking himself out of his stupor and heading towards the hills near the barriers.

Annabeth had avoided the edges of Camp territory since that day, but he had a feeling that this time would be different.

And it seemed like he was right.

Soon enough, near the pine tree that now marked the barrier’s limits, Annabeth sat with a hand against its—Thalia’s—bark, gazing out towards the horizon.

Quietly, he approached and settled beside her. She didn't turn to look at him, and he respected her silence, patiently waiting beside her.

"It's not fair." Annabeth finally spoke, her voice choked, though it seemed there were no more tears left to shed.

“It isn’t.” Luke agreed quietly.

"I want to be mad at you." She admitted, her gaze fixed sadly on the tree. "For not saving her, but you saved me. You could've left me, stayed behind like the others. But you didn't."

Luke hummed, turning to face her.

"Grover—" She paused, nervously wetting her lips, her eyes darting across his face while Luke maintained a neutral, non-judgmental expression. Then, she whispered softly, "He said this would be a new home for us. That there would be many more like us, and we would all be family. Can…can that still be true, even after those people didn't help Thalia?"

"I *know* it can." He replied just as softly, thinking about the fierce girl he had once read about, who had embraced and loved this place as her home.

Annabeth looked painfully vulnerable at this moment, with a delicate hint of hope flickering in her eyes as she gazed at him.

Skittishly, she edged nearer to him, inch by inch, pausing frequently, until she was pressed against his side. Gradually, she relaxed as Luke showed no outward reaction.

Inside his mind, however, Peter's words of *‘your brat’* echoed relentlessly.

Cursing to himself, Luke realized he was already attached.

As he stared at the darkening horizon, frozen still, with a small child nestled beside him, Luke's mind was consumed by a single hysterical thought.

*Am I a mother now?*

Chapter End Notes

It seems I've tricked you all completely by accident, lol. Some of the other demigods did fight. I tried to hint at it last chapter with this throwaway line: 'He heard the sounds of multiple battles in the distance, almost as if in a dream, but paid little attention to them.' And really, Peter exists—PETER WU, that bloodthirsty hallucinated boar; let's not doubt this man's insanity for even a second. But Luke didn't see it because he was too out of it during the last part, focusing solely on Annabeth that he even forgot about Grover. By the way, Grover is fine; Peter saved him, threw him over the shoulder and everything.

Anyways, Mr. D here is saying things with double meaning again, Luke tricking himself into not understanding what the god is implying, and then being grounded, which will

make his quest thing more difficult, but he will find a way. And yeah, Dean was the one to spill the beans; he probably got mad when he heard Luke went to fight a bunch of monsters, risking his life away from his overprotective gaze, while he was taking care of the Stoll menaces, who, I'm sure, were not easy to keep inside the Big House.

And Annabeth. She is angry and grieving. Then she went to pick a fight with Clarisse of all people, with that girl's enabler nearby as well. Anyway, she had mixed feelings; she is smart, she knows Luke saved her, knows somewhere in her brain that he couldn't save Thalia, but emotions aren't rational and she is seven. But, like our wise Peter said, now these two are connected. However, the relationship is still very fragile, and I feel Annabeth has a lot of issues that will need to be addressed at some point. On the more wholesome side, Luke has now become a single mom, which he already kinda was with the Stolls, but now he has had his awakening.

Thanks for reading! If you enjoyed it, please consider leaving a kudos or a comment ♥♥♥ I love to hear your thoughts!

# Chapter 19: Teenhood - Usurpation

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*I need to go on a quest immediately,* Luke thought dazedly as he struggled to remain standing.

His body ached and his head rang, making everything seem blurry and unfocused. Yet, Luke locked his legs, raised his sword, and faced his opponent once more, ignoring the whispers from the onlookers gathered to watch the challenge.

Edward didn't appear much better. Although he was older and taller than Luke, giving him more power behind his blows, his slower movements were a weakness that the younger boy exploited with a vengeance.

Unfortunately, his older brother was still a son of Hermes—faster than any opponent Luke had ever fought and familiar with his fighting style, not to mention vastly more experienced.

"Won't you give up, birdie?" Ed asked with a cocky grin, masking his wince of pain behind a confident expression.

"I could ask you the same." Luke replied flatly, squinting in a futile attempt to clear his vision while searching for any vulnerable spots to take advantage of.

However, the blow Edward had landed on his head proved devastating. Luke's vision remained unhelpfully blurry and worsened over time, the world spinning around him. Soon, a burning sensation rose in his throat as nausea began to take hold.

He barely had time to throw himself to the side before the older demigod could strike him in the stomach.

"Getting slower, aren't you?" Ed observed, ruthlessly pressing his advantage. The younger teen was forced into a defensive stance, struggling to avoid blows and, when necessary, blocking them—despite the strain weakening his legs and making his head throb painfully. "You can't win like this."

Ignoring his brother’s taunts, Luke gritted his teeth and retreated, maneuvering through the area while half-blind. Ed pursued him relentlessly, prompting Luke to try to position himself with the sun at his back, hoping to blind the older demigod with its light.

Thankfully, his plan worked.

As Ed aimed a slash at Luke's torso, he misjudged the distance and overreached. Seizing the moment, the younger teen struck his brother's ribs, causing him to lose balance and tumble to the ground, his sword clattering some distance away.

Quickly, Luke pinned Ed down by placing his knee firmly on his stomach, trying to immobilize the bigger man with some degree of success.

"Yield." He hissed, attempting to aim his sword at the other man's throat. Yet, feeling dizzy, he had to steady himself by planting the sword above Ed's head to avoid collapsing.

Which was a mistake.

Ed raised his hips off the ground, effortlessly lifting the lighter boy. Twisting his body and pushing against the back of Luke's knee with his leg, he caught the blonde off guard, disrupting his balance and making him release his weapon in surprise.

Moving swiftly, Ed seized the opportunity, grabbing onto his younger brother's sweatpants for leverage. Shifting his weight and using the momentum, he rolled into Luke, reversing their positions and pinning the boy down by the wrists.

"Yield." Edward's smug voice echoed in Luke's ears as he struggled to break free from his brother's grasp. But Ed, being taller and heavier, made it all the more difficult.

Disregarding the command, Luke tried to hook his leg behind Ed's thigh to unbalance him. However, his brother anticipated the move and mercilessly slammed Luke's head into the ground.

Black spots clouded the younger teen's vision, and he went limp, his ears ringing from the impact.

"A low move...for a low man." Luke slurred out hatefully, finding it difficult to speak with his cheek pressed against the ground, held in place by his brother's grip.

Closing his eyes for a brief moment only intensified the nausea and dizziness, and with a jolt of desperation, Luke realized he had lost.

Edward didn't dignify the taunt with a response. Instead, he pressed his hand warningly against Luke's head before releasing his younger brother, confident that the blonde was no longer capable of continuing the fight.

Luke wanted to press on, to secure victory and deny that fool the position that was Aubrey's —would always be Aubrey's. Yet, as he attempted to sit up, his vision briefly darkened, and he doubled over, clutching his stomach as he dry-heaved.

In his dazed state, the younger demigod heard Edward addressing the others, challenging anyone else to step forward and fight him for the counselor position, but the heavy silence that followed was answer enough.

"…and someone take my brother to the infirmary."

With that order, Luke felt someone helping him to his feet. Their touch eased the pain and gradually cleared his mind, improving his vision, although it remained somewhat blurry. Soon, a second pair of hands supported him, ensuring he stayed upright as they walked, while the first remained touching his arm.

Blinking slowly, he struggled to guide one foot after the other.

The brief respite from the touch wasn't enough to erase the suffering his body had just endured.

"Don't push yourself; I'm pretty sure you have a concussion." Katherine's voice gently chided from his left side, a touch of concern appearing under her normally calm demeanor.

With a painfully slow realization, the blonde recognize his curly-haired friend as the one making the pain go away.

"I'm sorry." Luke murmured weakly, his tongue feeling heavy in his mouth, causing his words to slur together in a barely coherent manner.

“It wasn’t your fault.” Levi was the one talking now, his voice tinged with barely repressed anger. “Edward is just—”

“Levi.” Kat warned. “Not now.”

Huffing, Levi complied, adjusting Luke’s arm over his shoulder to better support the younger boy.

Before long, they arrived at the Big House and entered the makeshift infirmary, where the sound of screaming children caused Luke to wince in pain, intensifying his dizziness, despite Katherine's efforts to alleviate his discomfort.

"Ah, great." Came the pompous voice of his least liked person beside Edward. "Luke Castellan, tell your little minions to leave my cabin alone. Being awoken with such a...surprise was rather disturbing, to say the least.”

"What do you want? I already returned your stupid book." Luke tried to say, but, unfortunately, his speech came out garbled.

Ryan evidently couldn’t decipher it, since he *very* smartly asked the most obvious question he could possibly think of.

“What? Did he hit his head or something?”

“What do you think, genius?” Levi retorted snidely, as he released his hold on Luke and passed him over to Katherine.

"It's clear he hit his head. I already figured that out." The Athena head counselor countered, though his tone betrayed his embarrassment.

Before Levi could use the chance to mock him, the curly-haired girl interjected calmly.

"He said he returned your book already and asked what you wanted." Kat translated, guiding Luke towards one of the sofa-beds in the room.

If Ryan answered, the blonde didn't hear it. He was too focused on blocking out the loud sounds around him and getting to the seat. When he finally sat on the comfy, soft surface, he nearly collapsed from the relief.

With the younger demigod now laying down, Katherine stepped back, which instantly made his pain sharpen, causing him to groan and curl up in discomfort. She wasn't gone for long, though; Luke soon felt her touch the back of his neck, tilt his head back, and slip something small into his throat.

Instinctively, he chewed, and the taste of home nearly brought him to tears. It was as if he were transported back to the Festas Juninas[1] held every June, where he went just to indulge in the food but always ended up having fun observing people in their checkered clothes dance forró[2] to the band's lively music and play silly games. It felt like he was eating baião de dois[3] with paçoca de carne de sol[4] or munching on corn while watching the quadrilha[5] dance, hanging out with friends, and celebrating with his family while the bonfire blazed under the night's sky.

As he swallowed, he felt better. The blurriness in his vision began to clear, and although he still felt dizzy, it was no longer as if he were navigating a constantly shifting kaleidoscope.

"How many fingers do I have here?" Kat asked, holding up three fingers.

"Three." Luke replied clearly, finally managing to speak like a human being again. Understanding how these assessments usually went, he informed his 'doctor,' "I feel better, but I'm still a bit dizzy."

She hummed in response, laying a hand on his forehead and starting to chant in Ancient Greek. Luke felt the healing process speed up, though it wasn't as strong as when the Apollo kids did it. In fact, it felt much weaker, only working as well as it did thanks to the ambrosia she had fed him.

"I've done all I can to heal the concussion, and you're fine now." She said wearily, her dark skin looking a touch paler, perhaps from the strain of using her powers. Narrowing her eyes, she added firmly, "For the next few days, take it easy. Especially, avoid hitting your head again—it could undo the progress we've made or even worsen your condition."

"Yes, ma'am."

Now that he was feeling better, Luke finally could pay attention to what all the noise was about. Turns out, he wasn't the only one from Cabin Eleven who had needed treatment.

Over in a corner, he spotted Connor and Travis in a heated discussion with Annabeth, completely oblivious to the new arrivals, especially Connor, who looked like he'd taken a beating.

"What's happening?" Luke asked, raising his voice when they ignored his first inquiry.

His question caught the attention of the children, causing them to stumble over each other in their rush to reach him first, all talking at once.

"That's what I was trying to tell you." Ryan interjected smoothly, his tone tinged with disdain as he glanced pointedly at the Stolls. "Your little menaces thought it would be clever to release a spider into Annabeth's bed, causing quite a *commotion*. As expected, she nearly had their heads for it." With a self-righteous lift of his chin, he added, "Isn't it your job as counselor, Luke Castellan, to keep your siblings under control?"

"It would be, if I were still the counselor." Luke replied with a dry tone. "As of today, Edward handles those matters."

He wasn't up to dealing with Ryan, let alone resolving whatever trouble his brothers had caused, after being usurped and badly beaten.

Still, he could take solace in the fact that Connor and Travis weren't around to witness the challenge; they were deemed too young to watch, which was for the best considering how these things often turned out bloody—something Luke had painfully learned firsthand.

"*Edward?*" Ryan echoed in disbelief, which, Luke could admit, brought him some satisfaction. But as quickly as the feeling came, it dissipated when the older man widened his eyes in realization and remarked, "So *that's* the reason you were so…debilitated earlier."

The children appeared visibly anxious at the word 'debilitated,' setting aside their differences as they gathered around him with worried expressions.

"Are you alright?" Travis asked, his wide blue eyes filled with concern as he tightly grasped Luke's shirt.

"I'm alright now." Luke reassured the three kids, doing his best to calm their nerves.

His affirmation seemed to soothe his brothers. However, he couldn't help but notice Annabeth studying him more intently than the other two, biting her lip as her eyes scanned his body, as if searching for any signs of injury.

"Does this mean you're no longer the supreme leader?" Connor interjected, his brows furrowing as he clearly picked up on the mention of Edward.

Now that Luke could finally see clearly, without any blurriness or dizziness impairing his vision, he noticed the bruises on his little brother's skin and the suspicious cuts on his shirt.

"Yes, at least for now." He answered absent-mindedly, his attention briefly shifting as he shot a questioning, if slightly accusatory, glance at Ryan, who appeared to take offense at his unspoken suspicions.

"Look, by the time I noticed, she already had a knife out."

"A knife?" Luke nearly shrieked, sitting up so suddenly that he felt dizzy, prompting Kat to shoot him a glare, which he pointedly ignored. "Who lets a kid have a knife?"

"I found it! You can't take it away!" Annabeth protested. "And they put a *spider* on my bed!"

"You stole it from the armory." Ryan corrected before turning to Luke to add his own unsolicited opinion. "A *spider* in Cabin Six, Castellan. This isn't a joke."

The Athena kids had serious arachnophobia, and every camper knew that, so what his brothers did was completely unacceptable.

However, Annabeth nearly killing Connor for it wasn't acceptable either.

Rubbing the bridge of his nose in frustration, Luke turned to the blonde girl, a touch of gruffness in his voice as he said, "I can't take the knife from you, but your brother can." He held an unwavering stare on the other teen until he nodded in agreement. "And never again use a knife on any campers, especially not on my brothers."

Annabeth wilted slightly, and the Stolls started to look smug until Luke turned his gaze on them.

"That wasn't nice. I know you two are aware of the spider and Cabin Six situation, and I don't want to see it happen again. Are we clear?"

With all three of the children corrected and seemingly repentant, Luke reclined on the sofa, feeling the beginnings of a headache coming.

Even in the midst of literal bed rest, he couldn't catch a break.

This reminded Luke that he and his friends needed to plan their next steps urgently, and he supposed he also *had* to share the great embarrassment of being *grounded* with them, since it seemed like a pretty relevant detail.

"Are you done?" Levi asked Ryan brusquely, clearly eager to dismiss the outsiders. "Luke needs to rest without someone yapping complaints at his heels."

Ignoring the other teen's rudeness, the son of Athena scrutinized the three of them with his sharp gray eyes and offered a faint nod.

"Yes, I suppose we're done for now. Come on, Annabeth."

Hesitating briefly, she scrambled onto the sofa-bed, shoving the Stolls away in the process, quickly giving Luke a hug before jumping off and hurrying after her brother.

Travis and Connor muttered to each other, glaring at the back of the blonde girl's head. Hastily, they adjusted their expressions to appear innocent when they noticed the older trio staring at them.

"In case it wasn't clear, you two brats need to leave as well." Levi clarified, squinting his eyes at both of them.

"Come on!" Travis objected. "We're from Cabin Eleven too!"

"This talk is for big kids only." Kat stated, shooing them towards the door. "And your brother needs to rest."

With those words, they glanced at their tired older brother sprawled on the sofa-bed before reluctantly allowing themselves to be led away.

Luke could admit he had exaggerated his exhaustion a bit to encourage them to leave. But his relief at managing to make the brats leave without protest was short-lived when zero two stopped abruptly at the open door and addressed Katherine.

"I can understand why you're staying.” Connor remarked, a glint in his eye that Luke didn’t entirely trust. Pointing a finger at Levi, he added slyly, "But him? He's useless."

"You—" Levi started to exclaim, but couldn't do more than stutter before the kids ran away giggling mischievously.

"Settle down, boca do inferno." Luke drawled, propping himself up on his elbow and resting his chin on his hand, watching the other teen grumble irritably as he paced across the room.

Levi shot him an annoyed look and snapped, "Shut up, princess. If anyone's the mouth of hell, it's those little hellions. Calling me useless!"

To this day, Luke didn’t know how the older demigod discovered what the nickname meant, but he did, and he didn’t seem to appreciate it as he should—a shame, since it fit him like a second skin.

After all, Levi had a notoriously sharp tongue and no impulse control.

"Calm down, Levi. They're just kids." Katherine retorted calmly. Then she turned to the blonde demigod and raised an eyebrow. "And you, don't provoke him."

“Whatever, we need to speak business anyway.” He answered, waving a hand dismissively.

"Yeah, first off, when are you going on a quest? It has to be soon." Levi asked, finally sitting down with his hands clenched tightly in front of him, staring at the younger boy.

Looking away uncomfortably, Luke laughed awkwardly and said, "About that...well, we have a little problem.”

He suspected his friends wouldn't appreciate hearing about the punishment Mr. D had imposed on his person.

"What do you mean?" The older man demanded, with Kat also turning to stare at Luke, a frown on her face.

Their combined gazes did nothing to soothe his nerves about the situation. But since he already started talking…

"Mr. D snapped his fingers and did his magic." Luke gestured, trying to imitate the god. "And bam, now I can’t leave Camp Half-Blood."

For a moment, both of the older demigods stared at him with confusion, but then the words seemed to sink in.

"Damn it!" The older man shouted, his hands covering his face in frustration, while Kat closed her eyes and took a deep breath, clearly trying to compose herself.

"What does that magic actually do?" She asked.

That's why Luke liked Katherine; she always got straight to the point.

"I can't cross the barriers at all. If I try, it alerts Mr. D."

He attempted it once. It felt like trying to pass through solid steel rather than an invisible magical barrier. Then Mr. D appeared, laughing at him, which made the situation even worse.

"We're fucked." Levi chimed in bleakly, his gaze distant. "We'll all be under that tyrant's thumb, and we'll gradually lose what little rights we have inside that cabin."

"Don't be so dramatic." Kat chided. "It hasn't even been a day since Edward won, and you're already being fatalistic."

Levi glared at her and retorted, "We'll see if you'll have the courage to say that to me again when they make you sleep on the dirty ground."

Kat's eyes widened as she froze, briefly considering that very real possibility. Then, with alarm in her voice, she declared, "Luke needs to go to the Oracle right away."

"What?" He exclaimed. "Weren't you the one who said I needed to rest for a few days or I'd die?"

"This is an emergency." She stated with a crazed flair, then added almost absentmindedly, "And hitting your head won't kill you—I think. It'll just worsen the symptoms."

Immediately, Luke took back what he said about liking Katherine.

"How reassuring...But how will going to the Oracle fix the fact that I can't leave?" He said dryly as he moved to sit up.

"Listen, Mr. D can't deny you a quest from the Oracle. It'll come with a prophecy and everything." She explained, growing more agitated as she spoke. "The gods don't like to mess with fate. So, I'm sure he'll lift the spell once you receive it."

"That's a lot of speculation." Levi observed, yet he appeared to be genuinely considering it. "But I think it's our best bet for now."

Both of the older demigods turned to look at Luke with expectant expressions.

Letting out a deep sigh, he reluctantly nodded. "I suppose it can't hurt to try..."

"Great!" Kat exclaimed, then she pushed Levi to his feet and continued, "Levi will distract anyone who shows up so you can sneak into the Attic unbothered."

"I will?" The older man blinked rapidly. When Kat stared at him with an unblinking gaze, he reiterated, "I will."

Before long, they slipped out of the infirmary and stealthily navigated the Big House. Fortunately, it appeared deserted—there was no sign of Mr. D, which felt like a small miracle considering he hadn't left Camp since the monster horde attack.

When they arrived at their destination, Luke looked back uncertainly and saw both of his friends giving him an encouraging thumbs-up before they returned their attention to guarding the corridor.

"Might as well finish what I started." He grumbled to himself, starting to climb the ladder.

Opening the hatch, Luke was greeted by the creepiest room he had ever seen in his life.

It was dark and musty, with the unmistakable scent of rotten wood and snakes lingering in the air. Strange objects were arranged like trophies: mounted heads, broken spears, and even a floating eye preserved in a bottle, giving the room the eerie feel of an eccentric collector's den.

As if that wasn't unsettling enough, at the far end of the room, a mummy dressed in hippie clothes sat on a stool, resembling a grotesque, human-sized doll.

This was The Oracle—or what was left of her body after decades of Hades' curse refusing to let her rest. The same damn curse that drove his mother insane. All because a god couldn't touch the real person responsible for his love's death, so he decided to punish an innocent instead.

Luke shook his head, trying to push those thoughts aside. He disliked the god of the dead, finding him both petty and cruel, but he doubted there was anything he could do about it.

After all, what would happen to him if he ever dared to step into the Underworld?

He cautiously approached the mummy, observing the corpse as one would a dangerous and unpredictable animal. When nothing happened, he allowed himself to relax a little and started thinking about what to do next now that he was here.

If he remembered correctly, he needed to ask a question, and the Oracle would provide an answer. Feeling somewhat stupid about speaking to a preserved corpse, Luke decided to give it a shot.

"How do I get the counselor position back?"

The mummy remained silent in response to his question. There wasn't even a hint of the green smoke he remembered from his mother's episodes—just the sad, dried up remains of what had once been a girl.

A surge of anger coursed through Luke's veins. After enduring years of his mother's screams and cries induced by this cursed spirit, he had finally come here, only to be met with silence?

Gripping his fists until his nails dug into his skin, he took a deep breath and asked another question, one that had haunted him since he had discovered where he had been reborn, "How can I escape from my fate?"

He stood his ground, uncertain of how long he lingered in that dim, foul-smelling room. Time dragged on, allowing waves of despair and disappointment to crash against his ribs.

Finally giving in, Luke descended the ladder and strode away, passing his friends without uttering a single word. As he left the Big House, Luke saw Levi and Katherine trailing after him from the corner of his eye, their expressions puzzled and subdued by his sour mood.

"What happened?" Levi asked, catching up to the younger but faster demigod, with Katherine joining them soon after.

"The Oracle didn't give me a quest." Luke replied with a sullen tone, marching onward without once meeting his friends' eyes.

He noticed the older demigods exchanging worried glances. Then Levi hurriedly stepped in front of him, causing Luke to come to a sudden stop.

“Okey. We’re fucked, but it’s not your fault. We just need to think of something different!”

Nodding in agreement, Kat added, "I'm pretty sure there are quests that can be done without needing the Oracle's guidance."

He *knew* about those kinds of quests and had even mulled them over. However, after thinking long and hard these past few days, he had firmly decided that there was no way in heaven or hell he would resort to that kind of last-ditch effort.

"I'm not that desperate." Luke snapped, trying to get past Levi, who kept getting in his way.

"But we are!" The older man pleaded, gripping Luke's shoulders and shaking them. "We are *that* desperate!"

"Come on, Luke." Kat said, her expression pleading. "You know as well as we do that we don't have any other solution."

Luke crossed his arms, staring them both down as he mulled it over.

Katherine was right—they didn't have many options left. He couldn't leave Camp Half-Blood without Mr. D’s permission, and their best plan had completely failed.

Sighing, he looked up at the sky before turning his focus back to his friends.

“Fine.”

Instantly, their faces lit up with grins and they started to celebrate, but fell silent the moment he raised a finger.

"But you two are going to help me get everything on my list."

“List?” Levi asked, looking completely confused.

"Yeah. Do you really think I'd ask for a favor without offering something in return? I'd rather not owe him *too* much."

Chapter End Notes

*So, here's an explanation of Festa Junina(1): It's a traditional festival held every June, also known as festa de São João, which literally means the party of Saint John. While it has heavy Catholic influences, it's also its own thing. It is very culturally important, especially in the northeastern region of Brazil. In schools, for example, it's common to organize festivals during that period, which brings us to the quadrilha(5) and forró(2). Quadrilha is a folk dance, while forró is a genre of music. For baião de dois(3) and paçoca de carne de sol(4), the former is a dish made of rice and beans with some other ingredients like cheese, while paçoca is shredded salted, sun-dried meat with cassava flour. Very, very delicious.

Moving on, Luke has lost his position. Like, Ed knew Luke was respected and became even more so after the monster horde incident, so in my head, he would act first to secure his position while his brother was still lacking a mission. Just to give you a sense of the size difference and how relevant that was, Luke is currently about 165 cm (5'5") and Ed is 188 cm (6'2"), so Ed, being an actual adult, is much bigger and certainly heavier, meaning that when Luke got immobilized, it was game over.

Connor and Travis messing with Annabeth, and the spider thing is absolutely canon. Their reasons, though, might differ. Ryan is here suspecting stuff and being pompous, while Luke and company are planning how to regain power. And yeah, the Oracle didn't work out, so there has to be a plan B that Luke doesn't like. At all. But alas, the cabin's needs are bigger than his wants.

Anyways, thanks for reading! Comments are always appreciated! I love hearing your thoughts! ♥♥♥

# Chapter 20: Teenhood - Bargain

Chapter Summary

Luke gets what he asked for, and certainly more than he bargained for.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Thanks again, man.”

“Think nothing of it.” Axel replied with some hint of melancholy on his tone, placing more candles around the makeshift altar they had quickly assembled. “Aubrey taught me, so it’s only right I pass it on to you.”

After making Kat and Levi go after the items from his list, Luke went to find Axel, intending to ask for his help with the how-to-ask-for-a-quest thing. After all, the older man was a veteran and was likely to have undertaken some missions that didn't originate from the Oracle.

It turned out to be a wise decision. The son of Hypnos was a fountain of information and had recommended this small ritual instead of merely offering a bunch of Hermes' favorite foods during the nightly offerings as Luke had originally planned. According to Axel, this method would be more effective in capturing his father's attention and, if they were lucky, making the god more likely to listen to him.

“So, I offer to the goddess of the hearth first and then to him?” Luke asked again, just to be sure, feeling a bit nervous now that it was about to begin.

“Yes. Do you remember what to say?”

Luke nodded nervously.

He had memorized the lines almost obsessively, anxiety nipping at his heels, along with his reluctance to call upon Hermes. Yet, he reminded himself repeatedly: he had to view this as a trade. By going through the formalities—offering traditional offerings, reciting hymns and prayers—he sought to gain some favor with his father and secure his help.

If it worked, it would be all he needed, apart from actually completing the mission, of course.

"Then I'll leave you to it." Axel said, standing up. As he passed by Luke, he gave his shoulder a supportive squeeze.

Now alone, the blonde demigod hesitated briefly, then cursed himself for wasting time before lighting a candle. Taking a deep breath to calm his nerves, inhaling the scent of strawberry incense in the process, he began the formalities; he poured the milk his friends had managed to get into a bowl he had stolen, filling it with meat and fruit as well.

“Defender of the householder, guardian of the hearthfire, Hestia, I praise and honor you.”

With some degree of shock, he watched the bowl ignite on its own. The heat spread through the space like a gentle cloud, not oppressive or dangerous, but rather encouraging and comforting, almost like an embrace. Soon, the bowl was empty again, though the warmth lingered.

Shaking himself out of his stupor, Luke continued, this time with little enthusiasm.

He carefully chose the best-looking foods and items he had researched and found to be favored by his father—strawberries, honey, beef, and even coins, both drachmas and regular mortal ones, which he had stolen since he didn’t have any money.

Placing the food in the bowl and the non-edible items on the altar, he proceeded with the ritual.

“Hermes, protector of the home, provider of feast and frolic, courier of dreams, kind Hermes, I call to you.”

Unlike his call to Hestia, the bowl didn’t burn.

Frowning, Luke leaned forward in confusion, wondering if he had done something wrong, when he was scared by a voice suddenly speaking right next to his ear.

“How delightful. Is this all for me?”

Startled nearly out of his skin, Luke watched as his father, now dressed in jogging attire with nylon shorts and a marathon T-shirt, casually circled around him. Hermes picked up the bowl and began to inspect the makeshift altar with keen interest, particularly focusing on the neatly arranged offerings.

Examining a small carved turtle with a pleased smile spreading across his face, his father pocketed it and moved on to examine the other objects laid around. He flippantly nibbled on the food as he analyzed each item with a practiced eye, addressing Luke as he did so.

"Did you make all of these? I've heard you enjoy spending time in the Arts & Crafts Center."

*Heard,* the demigod mentally scoffed, *yeah, heard from your little canine informant.*

"Yes." He answered. Hesitating for a moment, Luke could already feel the trepidation rising, but pressed on and asked, "Do you like it?"

Abruptly, his father paused and turned to face him, furrowing his brows as he studied the blonde with those inhuman blue eyes in silence.

Thankfully, Hermes soon relaxed, smiling softly and shifting his gaze to the last-minute trinkets the demigod had made.

“I do. You did a good job.”

Now unsure of how to proceed, Luke quietly watched as his father circled the small altar, deftly pocketing all the handmade carvings and stolen coins. Bemusedly, he wondered if it was magic that allowed them all to fit, since there was no way a normal pocket could contain everything.

At least the god seemed pleased enough with the offerings, which would make his plan a lot easier.

"You want something." Hermes stated in a very deceptively casual manner, not bothering to face his son, instantly putting the demigod on edge. "What is it?"

Luke knew his motives were obvious; the purpose of all this flattery and politeness was clear from the moment he lit the incense. Besides, he had no doubt Hermes was informed of the happenings inside Cabin Eleven and had an idea of what he wanted.

Even so, his father's directness unsettled him for a moment, almost prompting him to backtrack before he silently reprimanded himself for that momentary lack of composure.

“Father.” He started, speaking before he could second-guess himself. "As the god of merchants and commerce, you understand transactions better than anyone. So, I humbly ask that you consider granting my request, as I've paid you due honor."

In moments, Hermes stood before him, the abandoned bowl of food still rotating where he had just been moments ago, leaning down to meet Luke's eyes with an inscrutable expression.

Unnerved, the demigod remained frozen during his father's inspection, hiding his trembling hands behind his back.

Slowly, Hermes straightened to his full height, an unknown emotion glinting in his eye as he loomed over him and purred, "You want to trade, *little bird*? Then trade we shall."

Not daring to move, Luke stood as still as he could under the weight of his father’s gaze.

Suddenly, he found himself seated in a chair as Hermes reclined in his own seat in front of him, casually taking a sip from the bottle of milk that had been on the altar just seconds before.

Cautiously, he shifted his eyes around, wondering if his father had transported them somewhere else, but he was relieved to find they were still in the same small clearing where he had made the offerings.

Before the blonde could let himself relax, or as much as he could in his father’s presence, the sound of a deliberate hum startled him, snapping his attention back to the god seated before him.

Tilting his head, Hermes rested his cheek in one hand and drawled with clear amusement, "Well then, state your terms."

Eyes wide, Luke hesitated, his hands clenched tightly in his lap. Wetting his lips, he spoke carefully and slowly to avoid stammering, "As I'm sure you're aware, a potential contender for the counselor role must have completed quests to qualify for a challenge." He paused to gauge his father's reaction; Hermes appeared unblinking. Shuddering a little, Luke lowered his gaze and continued, "Since you're our patron god, I was wondering if—"

"If I could vouch for you?" His father finished, sipping on his drink, his gaze fixed on Luke.

Avoiding eye contact, he clarified quietly, "That perhaps you could grant me a quest, something that would demonstrate I'm the best candidate."

"I could." Hermes agreed nonchalantly. Then, his voice dropped almost to a whisper as he added, "But should I? Edward isn't entirely unfit for the role."

Speechless, the demigod raised his head to stare at his father in disbelief.

Edward, fit for being counselor? Did he hear that correctly?

"But, father, he doesn't treat the guests as well as he should." Luke lightly protested, trying to think quickly.

There must be something his father desired. Anything to persuade him to help—there had to be something.

"Maybe." Hermes remarked, leaning back in his seat and stretching his legs into the air, a table materializing beneath them. "But if the guests aren't behaving, wouldn't you agree the host has the right to intervene?"

"Yes, of course. But isn't diplomacy the initial approach to take in these circumstances?" The blond's mind raced as he tried to appeal to the god's domains. "As the patron-god of heralds and master of speech, wouldn't you find it more fitting to resolve this quietly?"

Humming absentmindedly, though Luke wasn't fooled—the intensity and sharpness of Hermes' eyes made it clear that it was deliberate—the god inquired, "How did you handle that disrespectful Levi boy?"

His father hadn't forgotten his friend's blunder from all those years ago, it seemed.

"He is now a dear friend and a great ally." He answered quickly.

"I see..." Hermes mused, caressing his chin with one finger as he contemplated Luke, his gaze feeling like a physical weight above the boy's neck. "It's quite a talent, I must admit, to turn an enemy into an ally."

"Then...will you help me?" Luke asked hopefully, leaning forward slightly.

"I didn’t say that." His father chuckled. With a cunning smirk slowly spreading across his face, he pointedly reminded the demigod, "A trade is a mutual exchange of equal value, son. While these trinkets and honors have pleased me, they’re not quite enough for what you’re asking."

What could his father possibly want? Being a god, he could have anything he desired with a snap of his fingers.

With a sudden jolt, Luke remembered the letter. It couldn’t be that easy…could it?

Deciding he needed to test it, he pushed aside his embarrassment, shifted in his seat, widened his eyes slightly, and tilted his head, pleading softly, "Please help me, dad."

Hermes’ whole body twitched at the word ‘dad.’

Raising a hand to cover his mouth, the god fixed his gaze on his son—who was doing his best to appear as pleading and endearing as possible—his finger tapping the arm of his chair as he seemed to ponder it.

"There is something you could do." Hermes said slowly. "A quest that Heracles once completed—very impressive and would certainly earn you a lot of glory and recognition."

*The Garden of the Hesperides,* Luke thought, blanching.

"What I want is very simple." His father continued, leaning forward with his hands clasped. "Fetch me one of the golden apples. That will be the price for the quest."

*Very simple, my ass.*

That was the quest where Book Luke lost his eye and the one that led to all quests being banned until Percy arrived at Camp Half-Blood. And now he was being tasked to do it even earlier!

Luke was only fourteen; how could he possibly manage to do it?

"Or you could stay here. Safe and sound." His father suggested slyly, observing his reaction and peering at him through lowered lashes. "Haven't you already tasted enough glory fighting that monster horde?"

Unease slithered up Luke's throat as he sensed his father was up to something, though he wasn't sure what. It *might* be mere paternal concern, but he suspected there was more to it than that.

Brushing aside the sensation, he countered with furrowed brows, "But that won't be enough to let me challenge for the role."

"True." Hermes accepted easily, *too easily*, a pleasant smile on his face. "However, completing just one quest, no matter how impressive, won't be enough either."

Luke frowned at his father’s words, but had to admit they held some truth in them.

Ed had numerous quests under his belt and was now the oldest in their cabin, making him the most suitable candidate according to the rules. Luke, being younger, could only challenge if he completed more quests—an almost impossible task made even more difficult by his current *grounded* situation.

Moreover, if by some miracle he managed to accomplish it, winning the subsequent duel would also be challenging.

"I could help you with that pesky little detail, you know?" His father suggested casually, smirking. "After all, the cabin is mine; I can appoint anyone I choose to lead it."

Pausing, Luke's suspicion returned with a vengeance at the god's proposal.

"How would that work?" He asked, narrowing his eyes in distrust.

"I could just appear there and tell Edward to step down immediately." Hermes offered smoothly, his voice as soft as silk.

His aura extended towards Luke, gentle and persuasive, offering reassurance that everything would be fine, yet it was restrained by the magic Mr. D had placed on his skin.

Perhaps sensing it, his father's expression became enraged, and his power flared uncontrollably for a brief moment. The sudden surge of energy was enough to make Luke instinctively recoil and curl into himself, a primal fear coursing through his veins and freezing him in place.

Then, the pain began, choking the demigod as he trembled, feeling as if it were a butcher knife slicing through him.

In a daze, he felt fingers forcefully turn his face toward glowing, frenzied blue eyes. As pressure built, Luke grasped the hands desperately, the god crooning softly and gently stroking his thumb across the demigod’s cheek, wiping away the tears trickling down his cheeks.

Suddenly, the pressure lifted, and the pain subsided, leaving the blonde gasping weakly.

Gradually returning to himself, Luke couldn't help but take notice that the foreign layer of magic Mr. D had placed over his skin had been shredded into countless pieces.

“This isn’t normal.” Hermes stated seriously, staring at him with a peculiar look in his eye.

Pulling his face away from his father's hands, Luke tried to lean as far back as he could, but with the god crouched right in front of him, there wasn't much space to move.

With a glare, he lashed out, his voice trembling more than he intended. "What isn't normal is you always invading my space!" Anger and fear welled up inside him, his voice thick with tears as he demanded, "What did you do?"

Furrowing his brows, Hermes softened his voice, concern evident in his expression as he stayed near. "I’m sorry for scaring you, son, but your reaction is worrying."

Luke rubbed his eyes and curled his body as far from the god as the confined space would allow.

Caged. He was *caged*.

"Dionysus did something." His father said quietly, though there was a demanding edge to his tone. "What was it?"

Stubbornly, Luke avoided eye contact and stayed silent. He anxiously clenched and unclenched his hand from his shirt, wondering where he went wrong.

He had done everything as instructed—the ritual, the words, the offerings—yet nothing had gone as expected.

"*Luke*." Hermes called, his tone sharper this time.

"H-he said I couldn't leave Camp because of what I did." He stammered, unable to hold back a flinch.

Humming softly, his father rose slowly, his blue eyes darkening like gathering storms.

"Is that so? Well, you don't have to worry about that anymore. I took care of it."

Perking up at that, Luke straightened and regarded his father dubiously before asking, "Really?"

"Really." Hermes echoed with some amusement, his expression softening as he looked at his son, settling back into his seat. "Though I'd prefer you stayed here."

"But I—"

"You *have* to get the counselor position, I know." His father cut in. "What I was saying before this...distraction, was that I could go there now and sort this out for you. Then there would be no need of a quest."

Furrowing his brows, Luke studied the god with skepticism, noting the careful way he held himself, the tone of his voice, and most importantly, the way his aura fluctuated around them.

Almost immediately, he remembered that his dog was a spy and quickly concluded that nothing from his father would come without strings attached.

"But what would you want in exchange?" Luke asked, his voice filled with suspicion.

With an almost playful smile, Hermes leaned forward and said in a faux-innocent tone, "I'm your dad, Luke. I'll help you; that's what dads do."

The demigod didn't buy his father's act for a second.

He wasn't keen on owing him, especially since the favor asked was a big one. Knowing how gods operated, he was certain the debt wouldn't be something he'd want to deal with.

"How about this instead?" He countered cautiously, still wary after his father's loss of control. "I complete the mission and get the apple you want, and in return, you appoint me as the counselor. That's the trade: the apple for the position."

"Ah, but that would amount to two favors." Hermes remarked in an offhand manner. "One for the quest and another for the appointment." His smile remained friendly, though a flicker of something untrustworthy shone in his eyes. "Wouldn't it be wiser to accept my offer? You could become counselor without any danger—no risking yourself or your friends, no battles with hordes of monsters..."

Ignoring him, Luke pressed on, "But the favor owed for the position would be less because of it, right?"

Raising one eyebrow, the god pondered the proposal for a moment, intertwining his fingers underneath his chin as he studied his son. Luke was certain he was weighing the offer in his mind, balancing it against his desires and searching for a way to achieve what he wanted.

"Well, you're quite clever." His father sighed, his expression briefly irked before returning to a cordial demeanor. "I agree to your terms. Bring me the apple, and the second favor will be collected once you become the head counselor."

Squinting at Hermes, Luke asked, "And what exactly would the second favor be?" Then, with a pointed tone, he reminded his father, "It will be a minor one, won't it?"

This wasn't exactly ideal; he needed to gauge how bad this deal could potentially be to him.

After all, the only reason he was taking on this particular cursed quest was to avoid becoming too indebted to his father, and thus under his control.

"That will be a conversation for later, son." The god dismissed the question, standing up and retrieving his phone from his pocket. "Right now, I'm needed elsewhere."

A sudden jolt of realization struck the demigod like a hammer: without any terms discussed, his father could demand anything he wanted for the second favor. Yet, with Hermes refusing to reveal anything, there was no way to know for certain.

"Wait, father!" Luke exclaimed, scrambling out of his seat before his father could leave. "When is the quest going to happen?"

"Weren't you calling me dad earlier? Keep doing it." Hermes corrected with a hint of exasperation. Then, he snapped his fingers, and Luke sensed something had changed, though he wasn't sure what. "As for when it begins, well, it starts now."

"What?"

"Here." His father said, handing him something materialized out of thin air. "Don't worry about supplies; I've packed everything you'll need." Pointing a finger at him, Hermes added firmly, "And remember, we're thieves. Be smart and don't take unnecessary risks."

Before Luke could protest, the god's form shimmered brightly, prompting the demigod to cover his eyes. When he opened them again, his father had disappeared, as though he had never been there in the first place.

Speechless, he gazed at the chairs—the only evidence Hermes had been there—and the now-empty altar, devoid of the food and objects he had placed there.

Blinking rapidly, Luke figured he had gotten what he asked for after all, but he had a growing feeling that he had—*very stupidly*—entangled himself in something he wouldn't particularly enjoy.

He snapped out of his stupor at the sound of approaching voices and the patter of multiple feet drawing nearer.

Clutching his backpack—the same old, beaten-up, trusty bag he had brought from his room back home—Luke waited. He recognized the voices as they drew closer, accompanied by the sound of barking.

Soon, Pipo emerged from the woods, coming to a stop in the center of the clearing. Levi and Katherine followed close behind, sweating and gasping for breath. Luke noticed with some surprise that both of the older demigods were equipped with bags and weapons at the ready.

"What's going on?" Levi asked between wheezes. "These bags just appeared at our feet, and then your demon dog came out of nowhere, biting my ankles! I thought you had him under control!"

"Pipo led us here." Katherine interjected, casting a thoughtful glance around. Then, she turned to Luke and deduced, "I assume your request has been granted, and now we're your quest companions. Are we heading out now? And what about that small issue of yours?"

"Yeah, my father sorted out my problem, and we need to get moving." Luke replied with a frown, brushing off Levi's complaints about the hellhound. "He said the quest starts immediately."

Kat nodded, adjusting her bag and the first-aid kit on her hip as she approached. Levi, on the other hand, shot Luke an incredulous look and was about to speak when Pipo suddenly growled in a surprisingly menacing way and began to chase him, herding the teen in a particular direction.

Sharing bewildered looks, Luke and Kat hurried to follow.

They raced after the dog along a secluded and deserted path through the forest, and Luke had an eerie impression that the route was somehow shortening and shifting.

Despite his certainty that they were moving away from the Camp's boundaries, they found themselves gradually nearing the barrier marking the edge of its territory.

Confused, he and his friends halted before crossing the barrier. Looking back, the blonde could no longer see the path they had taken. Instead, he saw only open space, with hills and

strawberry fields stretching to the horizon, and the forest they had been in moments before now far away on the other side of the Camp.

“What the fuck?” Levi exclaimed, and Luke couldn’t help but agree with the sentiment.

Their surprise was quickly interrupted by the hellhound, who barked impatiently at them. The dog sat just outside the barriers, positioned in front of a mail truck that had the Hermes Express logo prominently displayed on both sides.

Taking the lead, Luke stepped forward cautiously and instinctively closed his eyes as he neared the barrier, bracing himself for a collision with an invisible wall. When he felt nothing, he opened his eyes, and a small, joyful grin spread across his face as he realized he could pass through freely.

Excited, he tested it again by sticking his hand through and watched it pass effortlessly, feeling a knot in his chest loosen with the sight.

The pain and fear his father had instilled in him seemed almost worthwhile for this feeling of freedom.

*Almost*.

Nearly bursting with joy at his newfound autonomy, he skipped over to the truck with curiosity, examining it and peeking through the windows. To his disappointment, he found nothing inside.

A wary whine drew his attention, and the demigod turned to see Pipo’s ruby eyes watching him. The sight immediately soured his mood, bringing his grim reality back into focus.

Locking eyes with the dog, Luke narrowed his gaze and harshly muttered a few words meant only for Pipo, as his friends crossed the barrier and began to approach.

“You’d better have sorted out your loyalties by the time I get back.”

As soon as he said that, Levi rushed forward, carefully avoiding the hellhound as he peered into the truck with clear excitement. Meanwhile, Pipo shot Luke a wounded glance before retreating with his tail between his legs.

“A car! I can drive.”

“Can you?” Luke asked skeptically, eyeing the older man before adding, “You’re a year-rounder—when did you learn how to drive? There aren’t any driving lessons here.”

“Those are simply details.” Levi declared, waving a hand dismissively. But before he could reach the driver’s seat, Katherine beat him to it, shutting the door in his face and starting the car at the same time.

“*Those are simply details*.” The younger demigod mocked as he climbed into the back of the truck, leaving the other man stunned and rooted in his spot.

The sudden blare of the horn snapped Levi out of his daze, and he hurried to join Luke, taking a seat beside him. As he settled in, the older teen muttered grumbles under his breath, clearly flustered by Katherine's swift takeover.

"Where to?" Kat's voice called from the front.

"To San Francisco." Luke replied. "We're heading to the Garden of Hesperides to get my father a golden apple."

*And to the territory of both the Titans and the Romans,* he thought grimly as the truck started to pull away from Camp Half-Blood, *I hope we don't run into the Romans, or we might just end up with our memories wiped.*

Chapter End Notes

The ritual is something I researched and that people still perform today. However, I simplified it to make it shorter; there are many more steps involved. So, yes, Hestia is always honored first and last.

Regarding Hermes: he returned, and Luke got a lot more than he asked for. The bargaining and trading scenes were fun to write, especially the back and forth, since Luke shows he's quite crafty and paranoid. But really, who would blame him with a father like that? I tried to make Hermes show his cunning side, as well as a little bit of his Trickster god nature, demonstrating how unpredictable he is. But yeah, there is no such thing as a free lunch with him, as we learned with the dog, and Luke tried to free himself of any debts. However, I think Hermes still managed to have some leeway since he simply left when Luke started to press on the second favor. So, yeah, Luke got duped at some point.

The quest starts immediately. I imagine Hermes did that because he violently poofed Mr. D's magic out of existence and wanted Luke out as fast as possible so he could deal with that in the meantime. Also, Levi is on Hermes' shit list—man didn't forget he was badmouthed inside his own cabin. But his son likes the rude kid, so he can brush it off... for now. For the choice of quest companions, these are Luke's closest friends and allies. Hermes chose them because they are the poster kids of the other faction. The god can pretend all he wants, but he certainly knows what is happening inside his own cabin. And about the Ed thing, well, maybe he'll deal with that, or maybe he won't think much of it since it could be deemed as normal sibling behavior inside his head.

Anyways, thanks for reading! I love to hear your thoughts, and comments are always appreciated! ♥♥♥

# Chapter 21: Teenhood - San Francisco

Chapter Summary

Quest start!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Maybe Luke was imagining things, but it felt like they were speeding way beyond what seemed possible inside this mail truck that belonged to his father.

After a few minutes of just staring at the walls of the cargo area, he squeezed into the passenger seat up front next to Katherine, leaving Levi to nap alone on the floor.

At first, he didn't notice anything as he daydreamed and stared out of the car window while Kat focused on driving.

But the longer he looked, the more he sensed something was off.

They were moving far too smoothly, and although cars passed by on the road, there was no traffic or tolls in sight. They were also going too fast; Luke had seen a sign indicating they were entering Pennsylvania, and a couple of hours later, with the sky dark, a large road sign showed they were nearing Chicago.

It was very odd, especially since they hadn't been traveling for *that* long.

Furrowing his brows, Luke focused on his internal GPS to pinpoint their location and calm his nerves.

For some reason, it seemed more difficult than usual—perhaps because he hadn't used it at all during his years at Camp and had become a bit rusty.

When he finally succeeded, he was alarmed to find his senses in disarray, desperately trying to find out where he was but clearly lost.

This was extremely unnerving since his powers normally provided him with precise details, including exact longitude and latitude.

At that moment, it felt as though a veil had lifted from his eyes, letting him see everything clearly for the first time since the journey began.

All around the car, the surroundings wavered and shimmered, as if the world had turned liquid and lost its shape the moment he sensed something was wrong. Occasionally, it would

stabilize enough for Luke to see they were either in a town or on a road before the distortions started up again.

Meanwhile, a barely perceptible warmth seeped into every corner of the vehicle, growing more intense each time the area in their vicinity twisted around them.

*How could I have not noticed this before?* Luke wondered silently, rubbing the goosebumps on his arms as he felt the unmistakable feel of his father's aura everywhere around him.

He should have picked up on it, especially after *that*.

Feeling unsettled, he glanced at Katherine out of the corner of his eye. He wasn't sure what he was hoping to find, but since she was driving, perhaps she had noticed something unusual.

Yet, she appeared as calm as ever, her attention locked on the road.

Maybe it was just a side effect of his concussion?

He closed his eyes and rubbed his face, hoping that things would return to normal when he opened them again, but it was in vain; the world outside still folded into itself, as if he were dreaming rather than experiencing reality.

"You seem tired, Luke." Kat's voice cut through the air, startling him, though her gaze remained fixed on the road ahead.

"I guess I am." He replied weakly. "Maybe I should try to take a nap as well…"

Perhaps this hallucination would end after he got some sleep.

Katherine hummed softly as she navigated a curve, then reassured him, "I'll wake you both when we arrive. Rest up; you've had a long day."

Heading to the back of the truck, Luke deliberately avoided looking outside, worried it might make him feel nauseous.

Once he stepped into the cargo area, he felt a wave of relief. The enclosed space let him pretend everything was normal, as if they were on a regular road trip, free from the bizarre distortions outside.

Glancing around, he frowned when he saw that Levi was sprawled across the center of the space, meaning any spot Luke chose to lie down would involve some part of him brushing against the other teen.

Without giving it much thought, he gave the older boy a swift kick in the back, causing him to wake up with a start before Levi realized where he was and who was with him.

"What was that for? I thought we were under attack!"

"Move over." The younger demigod said, nudging the man's back with his toes. "I'm not sleeping next to you."

Levi smirked in a way that grated on Luke's nerves as he rolled to the far end of the space. Once there, he struck a ridiculous pose, waggling his eyebrows and taunting, "Oh, come on, princess, still so shy?"

"I'm not *shy*." Luke sniffed, deliberately setting his backpack between himself and Levi as he settled onto the floor.

"Oh, really?" The older man snorted. "Then why the bag?"

"So I don't catch whatever you've got. That's all."

"Catch what? My irresistible charm?" Levi mocked, crossing his arms behind his head and eyeing him. "Though you don't seem to need it looking like *that*. You're already as pretty as —"

"Good night." Luke cut him off, turning his back on the other demigod and closing his eyes, ignoring the laughter behind him.

"I'm telling you, *so* shy."

Pointedly, Luke didn't respond any further, and soon silence reigned in the car, broken only by the hum of the engine and Levi's breathing.

It quickly became evident that he was more exhausted than he had realized; his breathing slowed, and he relaxed almost instantly, drifting off to sleep as soon as his friend had fallen quiet.

Hardly had he closed his eyes when he found them open again, with Kat gently shaking his shoulders.

Groggily, Luke sat up and noticed that Levi had been woken in much the same way, looking quite ridiculous with his hair sticking in every direction.

"We've arrived." Katherine announced, crossing her arms and looking at them with a serious yet weary expression. "What's the plan?

"What time is it?" Luke asked, rummaging through his bag for the map his father had packed. "If I'm remembering this right, we can only enter the Garden when day turns to night. I think it's because the nymphs are associated with the sunset or something like that."

If he ignored the overall creepiness of having Hermes going through his things, Luke had to admit that the preparation was impressive.

His father had packed clothes, hygiene products, food, money, a map of San Francisco and even a new sword to replace the one lost during the horde attack.

"It's early morning. The sun's just starting to rise." Kat replied, stifling a yawn with one hand.

That meant she had driven all night without a single stop, which was impressive but likely left her exhausted.

Luke might have been beaten up, duped by his father, and sent on a dangerous quest all in one day, but Kat had not only healed him until she was worn out but had also driven them across the country—without resting once.

Feeling sympathetic, he suggested, “Levi and I can use this time to scout the area and locate the Garden of the Hesperides.” Luke already knew where it was, but he needed a plausible excuse for how he had obtained that information, or else it would be too suspicious. “You should rest up, and we’ll come back to get you when we’re done.”

“Yeah.” Levi agreed, rising and stretching his limbs, now looking more alert. “You’ve been up for a whole day, right? Get some rest and recharge. You’ll need your strength for when we get into the Garden—it’s going to be tough as hell.”

Kat, her eyes barely open, offered no protest. She nodded tiredly, tossed a blanket that seemed to appear out of nowhere onto the ground, and lay down on it, using her bag as a pillow.

Within moments, she was out cold, arms crossed over her chest like a vampire in its coffin.

She must have been really tired if she didn't even seem disgusted by having to rest on the car floor.

Slipping on his backpack, Luke quietly exited the mail truck, making sure not to disturb the sleeping woman inside, with Levi following close behind. He scanned his surroundings with a wary eye, relieved to find everything appeared normal—no hints of reality collapsing or warping, which was a reassuring sign.

To be certain, he checked his internal GPS to verify his exact location. It worked perfectly, offering him more reassurance than he had expected.

As Luke surveyed the surroundings, he noted that Kat had parked in a secluded alley, which was a smart choice. It reduced the risk of attracting unwanted attention to three teenagers—one of whom wasn’t even old enough to drive yet—crammed into a mail truck without any adult supervision.

“Are we going to do what Hercules did?” Levi asked, his eyes sparkling with a touch of childish excitement. “Find The Old Man of the Sea and make him tell us where the Garden is?”

“Heracles, that’s the Greek name.” Luke corrected absentmindedly, cautiously stepping to the edge of the alley and scanning the street for any signs of danger. Thankfully, it was deserted—both mortals and monsters seemed to be absent, maybe due to the early hour. “And where exactly are we supposed to find that god?”

“Well, he’s the god of the sea’s rich bounty of fish, so maybe we should check the docks?” Levi suggested, moving closer to the younger demigod and glancing around the area as well.

Pondering for a moment, Luke decided it was a valid plan of action and a convenient cover for the knowledge he wasn't supposed to have.

"You know what, Levi? That's actually a pretty good idea."

Luke opened the map, quickly pinpointing their location and showing it to the older man. As he marked possible nearby piers to start their search, Levi observed quietly from over his shoulder.

After a moment of thought, the other demigod hummed and pointed to a dock situated much farther away.

"There. That seems like a pretty good place to start."

"Why?" Luke asked, looking puzzled. "We could start with the ones closer by and expand our search if we don't find anything."

"We don't have much time." Levi reminded him, grabbing the map from Luke and examining it closely. He then pointed out a few locations to the younger boy. "This dock's near the fish markets. Since the boats are for fishing, the Old Man will probably be around there, given his domain and all. That should make it easier to find him."

"That makes sense…" Luke mused, studying the route to their new destination before rolling up the map and putting it in his backpack. "Alright, follow me. I'll lead the way."

"We can check out the other docks on our way back if we don't find anything there." Levi said thoughtfully as he trailed behind Luke. "That way, we cover more ground."

"That's okay, but what if we *actually* find the god? What's the plan then?" The younger demigod inquired as he guided them away from the empty streets and into the still sparse but increasing crowd, keeping a sharp lookout for any signs of danger.

It had been years since Luke had been out on the streets, and he felt a bit rusty. This made him more paranoid about being ambushed by monsters, especially since he doubted the scent trick would work as well now that he was older and with another demigod.

"We just grab him." Levi replied, his tone making it clear he thought the answer was obvious, which the blonde didn't appreciate at all.

Sighing in frustration and resisting the urge to smack the other demigod, the younger teen clarified, "That god is a master shapeshifter. When we grab him, he'll try to change forms to escape. So, what I'm asking is, should we set up a trap or something?"

"But didn't Heracles manage to hold onto him even when he was changing shape? We should be able to do the same."

Rolling his eyes, Luke shot back, "We're not Heracles, for one. And I'm not keen on turning this into a rodeo with the Old Man until one of us tires out. There's got to be a smarter way to get what we want."

As he walked ahead, the blonde heard Levi muttering something under his breath and impatiently waited for a coherent reply.

When the silence stretched on, Luke's annoyance grew with each passing moment.

Finally, fed up, he turned around.

"Dude, we need to—" Luke stopped mid-sentence when he saw Levi frozen in place, staring at a bench with a face as pale as a ghost's.

Following the older teen's gaze, he saw three women sitting there, knitting a single thread, and watching them—*him*—with an unsettling, unblinking focus.

He *knew* those women.

In a daze, Luke moved beside Levi, who was now desperately trying to pull him away, but the younger teen remained unmoved, his gaze locked on the Fates.

They looked ancient, their skin sagging with a multitude of deep wrinkles that carved lines through their faces like crumbling valleys and their stern expressions only added to their intimidating presence.

One of the women held a spindle, methodically unwinding it; another had a staff resting on her lap as she measured the thread; and the last, Atropos—*the Inflexible One*—gripped a pair of scissors in her gnarled hands as she locked eyes with him.

Deliberately, they manipulated a piece of fabric—a peculiar blend of sky blue and peach where the colors seemed to merge seamlessly—and attempted to knit it. However, the thread stubbornly resisted, unraveling almost as soon as they shaped it.

Time seemed to freeze as Atropos raised her wrinkled, trembling hand and pointed her scissors at Luke.

A voice echoed in his mind—crackling and tremulous, yet resonating with countless other voices, both strong and weak, old and young. It was a sound that commanded silence, forcing whoever heard it to listen.

*Anomaly.*

A wave of anger surged through Luke, and he snarled at them. But a sudden gust of wind forced him to shut his eyes.

When he reopened them, the bench was empty. The ambient sounds of birds and people, which he hadn't realized had gone silent, returned, and Levi's worried and terrified face came into view, hovering in front of him.

"What were you thinking?" He shouted, drawing curious glances from a few onlookers as he shook the younger boy by the shoulders. "You shouldn't have looked!"

Luke shot a sharp glare, pushed the older man’s hands away, and turned on his heel, striding off.

“Hey! Don’t ignore me!” Levi exclaimed, trying to keep up with him.

"Whatever." The younger teen muttered, keeping his eyes fixed ahead. "We have more important things to deal with right now. For example, an actual plan for when we find the sea god. We can’t just hold on tight and hope for the best. We need something more dependable."

“Oh, so we’re just going to ignore the very concerning appearance of the Spinners right in front of us, are we?” Levi asked, disbelief evident in his voice.

“Yes.”

Preferably forever, if Luke had his way.

“You’re impossible.” The taller man exhaled heavily, rubbing his face with his hands. He let his hands drop, looked up at the sky for a moment, then turned to the younger boy and said, “I can’t believe I’m going along with this, but fine. What’s your plan for catching the Old Man?”

Smirking mischievously, and with quite a bit of relief, Luke leaned in and whispered his idea to the older boy as they approached their destination.

When they arrived, the blonde was surprised by the pier's crowd at this hour. Observing the men boarding their boats and the vendors arranging their wares, he figured that fishermen and merchants likely start their days early.

Navigating the bustling pier with Levi, Luke’s gaze caught something out of the corner of his eye—just what he needed.

He subtly nudged the other teen to signal what he was about to do, then smoothly detached himself and approached the stall with a casual, nonchalant air.

Under the suspicious gaze of the saleswoman, the demigod pretended to browse through the wares, examining each item with deliberate interest.

When the vendor was momentarily distracted by other customers, he grabbed his target and slipped it into his bag in a single fluid motion. He then merged with the crowd, evading the woman’s gaze before she could notice anything was missing.

Sure, he could have bought it. But why waste money on this when there were more important things to spend it on?

Reappearing beside his friend, Luke fell into step like he had never left, a smug smile playing on his lips.

“Did you get it?” Levi asked without glancing at him, his eyes fixed on every old man who passed by with such intensity that they started giving him odd looks and steering clear.

“Yeah, I got it. And ease up on the creepy stares—you’re going to give us away.”

“I’m not being creepy. I’m just trying to figure out which one might be our guy.” Levi protested, squinting at an elderly tourist couple who quickly moved away, likely thinking he was bit touched in the head.

Luke tilted his head, raised an eyebrow at the older demigod, and let out a skeptical sound.

"You know, just a guess, but I don't think our guy will be pretending to be a tourist.” He knew the man would be among the beggars, but he had to find a natural way to steer the conversation to that conclusion. “If you were a god of fish, where would you be?"

Humming thoughtfully, Levi furrowed his brows as he scrutinized the dock yet again.

Before long, a look of realization crossed his face when he noticed the scruffier-looking people scattered around.

“The fisherman or the beggars.” Levi declared with a determined expression. His eyes shifted to the younger teen as he asked, “But how do we figure out which one is him?”

“You leave that to me. I’ll know.” Luke replied confidently.

He gestured for Levi to follow and made his way toward the cluster of shabby-looking people sitting on the ground. He kept his distance, avoiding eye contact and ignoring the stares from those he passed, turning his backpack to the front of his torso to avoid any pickpockets.

All the while, Luke kept sniffing for any unusual stink, since the books mentioned that this god had a very *distinctive* smell. He also tried to sense any divine energy, even though he had never done it on purpose before.

Given his sensitivity, he figured it was worth a shot.

After walking for a while and encountering many unpleasant-smelling people, Luke finally spotted a suspicious man passed out on the ground, sprawled out in a sunlit area near the water.

Extending his hand, he gestured for Levi to be ready as he crept closer to the old man.

It looked like they had found their target—he reeked of rotten fish, seaweed, and the ocean.

The guy looked like a shabby version of Dumbledore, with a long, yellowed beard and a once-white robe that had seen better days. Beneath the robe, his tattered pajamas looked more like discarded rags, and he had a noticeably prominent belly.

“Excuse me, sir?” Luke began pleasantly, leaning down with his hands behind his back.

The god was jolted awake, and his eyes darted around before locking onto Luke with a wary glare.

“What do you want, kid?” He snapped, rising faster than seemed possible for someone his age. He angled his body towards the sea, eyeing the blonde with suspicion, especially his orange Camp shirt.

Maintaining a friendly smile, Luke subtly signaled for Levi to circle around and position himself behind the god.

Meanwhile, he began to distract the old man with flattery. He figured that a bit of praise would go a long way, as gods typically enjoyed being exalted and he might be eager for some recognition.

“I was just wondering if you’re really Nereus. I didn’t expect someone of his stature to be lying on the ground in a place like this.” Sighing dramatically, Luke covered his mouth with his hand and gazed out at the sea. “He belongs in a grand palace beneath the waves, not here.”

Nereus slowly turned his head toward Luke, puffing out his chest slightly. The flattery seemed to ease his suspicion just a bit, making him a little more receptive and willing to listen to the demigod.

“That’s right.” The god gloated, “I was here long before these nouveau riche upstarts. And, well, I like to visit these places from time to time, enjoy a bit of sun.” He gave Luke a critical once-over and added, as if offering a grand piece of advice, “Perhaps you should do the same, child. You’re looking a bit too pale.”

Luke’s brow twitched at the uncalled-for criticism from a man who seemed more at home in a dump than as a powerful god.

Struggling to maintain his composure, he managed a pretty smile and responded with more empty praise, “How impressive! I suppose even a sea deity as powerful and wise as you must enjoy a bit of sunshine now and then.”

“Indeed. The sea is a fascinating realm—mysterious and dangerous, but the surface has its own charm.” Nereus nodded sagely, stroking his grimy beard as if he were a venerable master. Eyeing Luke intently, he scrutinized the demigod as though searching for something. Suddenly, he snapped his fingers as if struck by a revelation. “You must be a child of Aphrodite. With your loveliness and appreciation for the sea—she, after all, emerged from the sea foam.” He paused abruptly, narrowing his eyes. “Or perhaps—”

At that moment, Levi sprang into action, seizing the god from behind. The old man let out a loud scream and began to thrash wildly, struggling to break free.

“This is an outrage! I’m just an innocent old man!” Nereus screamed, flailing more violently.

Luke could no longer tell if Levi was holding the old man or if the old man was somehow grabbing onto Levi in his wild struggle.

“We just need you to answer our questions!” Levi panted, fighting to maintain his grip.

Meanwhile, Luke opened his backpack, retrieved the item he had stolen, and readied it, giving his friend a reassuring thumbs up.

“Heroes! Always ambushing me with their foolish questions!” The god wailed dramatically, writhing so intensely that Levi could only cling to him with his hands, as the rest of his body was flailing through the air.

“Fuck! Don’t start shape-shifting now, old man!” The older demigod yelled.

As soon as Levi shouted, the god began to change shapes, thrashing wildly. Within moments, he transformed into a whale, then a shark, and even a tuna.

None of these forms were small enough for Luke’s plan, though.

Unperturbed, the blonde followed them, calmly moving as they demolished benches in their struggle—one trying to maintain the hold, the other trying to break free.

“Ah, damn it. You—” Levi gasped, sweat pouring down his face as he fought to tighten his grip on the shapeshifter’s neck. “Not a goldfish! Please!”

With a malicious glint in his eye, Nereus transformed into the small fish, making Levi flail helplessly and topple to the ground as he lost his grip.

The old man had little time to gloat before Luke appeared beside him and quickly trapped the transformed god inside a glass jar.

He smirked at the bewildered expression on the fish's face—he hadn’t realized fish could look so confused.

“Now, will you answer our questions?” Luke asked with a pleasant tone, a sly smile spreading across his face.

The goldfish bobbed up and down, as if grudgingly nodding in agreement.

Tilting the jar upside down, the demigod watched as the fish fell and reverted to the familiar form of the old man, who lay on the ground glaring at him with indignation.

“I should have known!” He exclaimed with a scowl. “You’re the child of that oversized pigeon, deceiving poor, defenseless old men!”

“You’re anything but defenseless.” Levi added grumpily, looking disheveled and slightly battered from the struggle.

Ignoring their comments, Luke crouched down and met Nereus’s gaze. Pointedly, he questioned, “A question for a capture, isn’t that how this works?”

“Oh, fine!” The sea god sighed, rising smoothly. “Ask your question. But just one.”

“Where is the Garden of the Hesperides?” Levi asked quickly, as if he feared the god might not keep his promise.

“Following in Heracles’ footsteps, are you?” Nereus mused with a hint of amusement before responding. “Head past the Golden Gate Bridge, into Marin County, and up the path to Mount Tamalpais. There you’ll find the Garden of the Hesperides.”

Standing up, Luke cast a thoughtful glance at the distant bridge cutting across the landscape. Then, looking up at the sky, he realized they still had quite a while before they could truly start their quest.

“Now, the deal is fulfilled.” Nereus declared, drawing the attention of the two demigods. Before leaving, he turned back to Luke, briefly appearing like the wise god he was supposed to be. “You’re quite clever, child. Never before have I been trapped in a glass jar. I wish you success in your quest.”

With that, he leapt into the water, disappearing beneath the surface with surprising speed.

“Well, that just happened.” Levi muttered, leaning tiredly against a column.

“Yeah, we got what we needed, so let’s head back.” Luke said, already starting to walk away before Levi could say anything.

Judging by the position of the sun, it wasn’t even midday yet. Still, they needed to plan how to steal the golden apples and get some rest before heading to the Garden.

With his father’s mail truck ensuring a fast journey, they had plenty of time to prepare before sunset, and he intended to use that extra time wisely.

Despite everything, Luke felt a sense of relief at how smoothly things were going. They had reached San Francisco quickly, successfully tricked a god, and—so far—avoided any monster attacks.

So, quite a victory in his humble opinion.

Perhaps the universe wished to prove him wrong, because just as that thought crossed his mind, a high-pitched scream pierced the air, followed by a guttural roar emanating from one of the alleys on their way back to the car.

Startled by the noise, Luke wasn’t able to stop his friend in time.

He watched with wide eyes as Levi rushed toward the sound—very, *very* stupidly. Silently cursing, he followed closely behind, easily keeping up with the older demigod.

“What the fuck are you doing?”

“We need to help them!” Levi shouted defiantly, not slowing down in the slightest.

Quietly saying bye-bye to all his plans, the blonde begrudgingly allowed himself to be led by the other teen.

The moment he reached the alley and saw what the hell was causing that ruckus, he froze, his face draining of color.

In front of him, a red-haired girl, perhaps a little younger than he was, struggled against a massive cyclops.

Two of her companions lay motionless on the ground, and Luke couldn't help but feel a surge of nausea as he saw that one of the kid's guts were not where they were supposed to be.

To make things worse, he noticed the color of their shirts—*purple*.

He really, *really* wished to avoid any involvement with the Romans.

But as he stood there, stunned, watching Levi let out a war cry and charge into battle, Luke realized it was far too late for any whining.

*What's next, a Roman god ambushing us?* He grumbled to himself as he rushed into the fray, narrowly saving his bull-headed friend from a bone-crushing mace strike at the last moment.

Chapter End Notes

So yeah, magic car. It just made sense—Hermes is the god of travelers, and there was that little hint last chapter with the forest road, so the mail truck was just an extension of that. In my head, with Hermes driving, the car moves instantly to places. And yeah, Luke being sensitive again: this time it took a while to be noticed, but he did, with the Mist making it more difficult to detect.

The Fates make their appearance, and I think it gives a hint about what's going on with Luke's situation.

Also, Levi and Luke being buddy-buddy, working together to corner Nereus. The whole plan was to play into Luke's strengths. He's quite strong, but he's a glass cannon (with a concussion healed, like, the day before) and keen on self-preservation, so he uses a glass jar to trap the god and get his question answered. He guided Levi—who definitely wanted to follow Hercules' footsteps, which is why he's the one grabbing the shape-shifting old man—in what to say, tricking the sea god into changing shapes and becoming over-confident. In the end, Nereus shows he is more than he seems.

And then, a wild Roman encounter, just to make Luke's life even more complicated.

Anyways, thanks for reading! Comments are always appreciated; I read and treasure every single one! ♥♥♥

# Chapter 22: Teenhood - Wild Romans

Chapter Summary

Levi having his mind blown

Chapter Notes

Since I have reached a point in the story I'm quite satisfied with, I'll be slowing down on updates. My new schedule will be to post a new chapter around the end of the week, definitely on the weekend, though.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"We need to leave." Luke hissed insistently.

"Why?" Levi, being the dumbass that he was, asked loudly.

His question caught the attention of the red-haired Roman, who had been checking on her companions—what was left of them, at least.

By the time they arrived to help, the demigods had already been incapacitated. One of them was dead, his guts strewn around in a macabre display, while the other was still alive—barely—her arm torn off like a broken doll, but still clinging to life.

Luke and Levi had done their best to rescue the remaining unharmed girl, but it had been a tough battle. The cyclops was massive, but fortunately not very smart, so the three of them managed to take it down relatively quickly.

But the battle had been filled with enough close calls to make the blonde never want to go near one of those monsters again.

"Thanks for saving us, seniors!" The ginger exclaimed, her eyes wide like a hunted animal's and her smile wavering at the corners.

The poor girl was terrified and doing her best to hide it.

"Seniors?" Levi whispered under his breath, his brow furrowed in confusion—already a troubling sign in Luke's opinion. However, to the blonde's eternal relief, the taller man brushed it off, softened his tone, and said gently, "No need to thank us; it was the right thing to do. Isn't that right, Lukey?"

With evident lack of enthusiasm, the shorter teen nodded. When the older demigod pointedly poked him in the ribs, he added, “Of course. It was the right thing to do.”

“We’re very thankful.” She repeated, her voice trembling. The ginger glanced at her fallen companion before quickly averting her gaze. “If you hadn’t been here…”

“But we were here, and you’re safe and the other girl is still alive.” Levi interjected firmly.

“You’re right, senior, of course.” She quickly agreed. Then, studying both of them, she furrowed her eyebrows and asked, “May I have the honor of knowing the names of our saviors?”

Oh no. Is she suspecting something?

“I’m Levi, and this is Luke.” The older man introduced them, with no input from Luke—because, *obviously*, this bull-headed idiot never listened to him anyway. “And you are…?”

“*Ave!* I’m Gwendolyn, a new recruit of the Fifth Cohort.” She greeted *very* enthusiastically, placing a closed fist over her heart and standing at attention, her posture rigid, feet together and back straight.

Startled, Luke quickly masked his reaction and studied her more closely. She was probably around twelve, the age when campers were allowed to venture out—assuming the rules were similar in Camp Jupiter. Her bright carrot-colored hair shimmered red in the sunlight, while her pale blue eyes darted restlessly around the space.

If his memory served him right, this was the girl who would die and then come back, due to Thanatos being kidnapped or something like that.

More importantly, Luke needed to get them out of there as soon as possible; the way she introduced herself was a glaring sign that they were not from the same group.

It was clear even to the blind.

Meanwhile, Gwen continued to stare at them, as if expecting more, likely wondering why they hadn’t mentioned their nonexistent cohort.

When it became clear they weren’t going to reveal it, she narrowed her eyes with suspicion, subtly tensing as if preparing for a confrontation.

“Well met, soldier. What are new recruits doing outside of Camp?” Luke asked with feigned confidence, straightening his posture and crossing his arms behind his back as he immediately took notice of the changes in her behavior.

At the same time, he sharply kicked the extremely confused Levi’s ankles before the man could open his mouth and risk blowing their cover.

The ginger studied him for a long moment and appeared to believe his act, probably because she wasn’t thinking clearly after being attacked by a monster, having one companion dead, and another maimed.

Her youth and clear need for someone older to provide comfort also made Luke and Levi seem like a good enough fit.

It was an advantage they could use, a fact the blonde acknowledged with a hint of guilt.

Slowly, she relaxed her rigid stance, reverting to her nervous and frightened demeanor, her eyes welling with tears as if she were on the verge of breaking down.

“W-we were sent on a simple quest, just a basic fetch-and-return mission to experience the outside world.” The girl began, sniffing. She glanced at her friends and lamented, “It was supposed to be easy…but then we were ambushed by a huge cyclops.”

“You should return to Camp at once, recruit. Your friend needs medical attention.” Luke suggested, eager to send the Romans on their way. Despite his urgency, he wasn’t cold-hearted; he softened his tone and offered help where it was needed. “We can offer you some of our provisions, but we can’t accompany you, as we’re on our own quest.”

By now, Levi was staring at the younger demigod with wide, focused eyes and raised brows.

Luke deliberately ignored him, subtly waving his hand in hopes that Levi would understand and stay quiet.

Thankfully, despite rolling his eyes, the taller man nodded in agreement, crossing his arms and letting the blonde take the lead and continue with his bullshitting.

“We don’t want to be a burden on the seniors, but any help you can spare would be greatly appreciated.” Gwen said formally, her voice tinged with relief.

Silently, Luke nodded and walked over to the injured girl, deliberately avoiding a glance at the dismembered boy lying some distance away. Despite his efforts, he couldn’t ignore the strong smell of blood and entrails, which made him feel slightly queasy.

Shaking his head, he crouched beside the disorientated kid, rummaging through his backpack for some nectar. Once he found it, he gently tilted the girl’s head back and dripped a few drops into her mouth, just enough to ease her pain and speed up her healing.

“This will help her feel better and certainly make the journey back easier, but she still needs to see a medic.” Luke spoke over his shoulder, briefly pausing to watch as the color slowly returned to the girl’s cheeks.

Satisfied with her condition, he helped the kid to her feet, steadying her when she nearly toppled over, and guided her toward the other two. There, he saw Levi sharing some of their provisions, such as a little bit of ambrosia and food.

With a hint of relief, Luke noticed that the other Greek wasn’t offering any drachmas, which would have been a dead giveaway.

Passing the girl to Gwen, he declared, “It’s time for us to go our separate ways.”

The red-haired girl adjusted her friend's arm over her shoulder and nodded firmly as she started to walk away from the alley. She paused, turning back to call out a bit more cheerfully, "*Vale,* seniors! I'll be sure to find you at Camp when you return and thank you properly!"

As he watched them leave, Luke silently patted himself on the back for a job well done.

However, worry still gnawed at him. If the girl was going to search for them, she might discover that they weren't actually demigods from Camp Jupiter, and shit would hit the fan very quickly.

Given that she seemed like a *very* loyal little Roman, there was no way she would keep her mouth shut.

Of course, that would only happen if the gods didn't intervene first, which was the most probable scenario.

"We could have accompanied them." Levi's voice pulled Luke from his thoughts.

Glancing at the other teen, the blonde saw him frowning as he stared at the girls.

Sighing, Luke turned back to look at them and replied quietly, "We don't mix with those people, Levi."

"I didn't realize you were prejudiced, Luke." His friend retorted, a hint of reproach in his tone.

"You saw, didn't you? They're not demigods from Camp Half-Blood." The younger boy brushed off his friend's disapproval and continued, "If we followed them, we wouldn't be able to keep up our act. And then what? That girl nearly attacked me when she thought we weren't her seniors. Imagine facing an entire horde of soldiers like her—older and more experienced."

Levi clicked his tongue and glared into the distance but didn't protest. He likely realized Luke was right—or perhaps he already knew it and was mad that his suspicions were being addressed so bluntly.

After all, why else would he have avoided offering any drachmas to the Romans?

Silence hung between them as Luke moved to the edge of the alley, giving his friend space to absorb the shocking revelation that they weren't the only demigods in the world.

Observing the people move about the street, he kept an eye out for any monsters while people-watching. He heard Levi shuffling around from behind him and looked back to see the taller man placing coins over the dead boy's eyes, paying for his passage to the Underworld.

Levi then stayed there, gazing at the boy with a vacant expression.

Biting his lip, Luke hesitated, troubled about what to do next, when an unsettling sensation caused goosebumps to rise on his skin.

*Oh God. It's so near.*

With trembling hands and his heart pounding in his ears, Luke felt sweat trickling down his neck as he desperately scanned the crowd.

Everything seemed normal, but it wasn't—*it wasn't*.

Then, a sudden movement at the edge of his vision made him stiffen like a startled rabbit. His shaking hands gripped his shirt as the aura swept through the area, briefly lingering on him with some interest before moving on.

The presence of the deity was overwhelming, denser than any divine aura the demigod had ever encountered. It also felt incredibly powerful—more so than Mr. D or even his own father.

There was something magnetic about it, but beneath that charm lay a real sense of danger—cold, calculated, and measuring everything around it.

Frightened by what he might discover, Luke slowly turned his head toward the disturbance and spotted the deity.

It was a man, moving in the direction the girls had gone, with the crowd parting around him as if by magic, though they seemed unaware of his presence. He was well-dressed, in a beige turtleneck shirt beneath a dark trench coat, black denim pants, and dress shoes.

Almost as if he sensed the stare, the god halted, slowly scanning the area with a sweeping gaze before his head snapped to face Luke, making him flinch at the sudden attention.

Though the distance blurred the man's features, the demigod could make out brown hair and what seemed like a growing smile.

Whether it was friendly or threatening, he couldn't quite tell.

Much to his disbelief, the deity raised a hand and gave him a casual wave.

Quickly, Luke retreated into the alley, but as he did, the aura returned, lazily slithering back in his direction—toying with him.

Not wanting to find out how such intense divine energy would affect him, he hesitated before stepping back into view. Gripping his shirt tightly with one hand and deliberately avoiding eye contact with the god, the blonde waved back with stiff, awkward movements, causing the aura to withdraw slowly, pulsing as if it were laughing.

When he mustered the courage to look up, the man was nowhere in sight.

With his heart in his throat, Luke rushed over to Levi, his distressed expression instantly alerting the older man, who quickly stood up and prepared for a fight.

"We need to leave, now!" He urged, tugging insistently at the taller teen.

Without hesitation, Levi took the lead into the street, ready for a confrontation with monsters or something similar. But paused and scratched his head in confusion when he found only ordinary people going about their day.

Before he had a chance to question what was happening, Luke, terrified, wasted no time and dashed past him as if fleeing from the devil himself.

“Oh, fuck! Slow the hell down! I can’t keep up!” Levi’s voice echoed from somewhere far behind him.

Luke forced himself to reduce his speed, giving his friend a chance to catch up. His gaze anxiously darted around, convinced that the deity would pounce the instant he wasn’t paying attention.

It was a pointless worry, really—the god would strike whenever he chose, no matter how alert or prepared Luke thought he was.

He only felt a sparse sense of relief when he reached the mail truck, entering it with a level of eagerness he never expected to feel about anything related to Hermes.

Feeling a bit safer, Luke sat down and focused on his breathing, clutching his backpack to his chest.

Distractedly, he heard shuffling and panting as the car doors slammed open, which jolted Katherine awake from where she had been dozing in the middle of the space.

“What was that?” Levi demanded, his face red and wheezing as he staggered inside.

“A god.” Luke whispered, pressing his bag more tightly against himself to steady the trembling in his hands.

“A *what*?” The older man exclaimed in disbelief, his voice rising an octave.

Hastily, he cast a disturbed glance outside while shutting the doors—*as if a puny car could stop a deity*—and then took refuge with the other two teenagers in the back.

Sitting up now, Katherine cleared her throat to get the agitated boys' attention, then clasped her hands together and calmly suggested, “Perhaps you two should start by explaining what happened while you were out.”

Exchanging glances with Levi, Luke began recounting the events of that morning, with the older man chiming in occasionally. Luke’s tone grew more evasive as he described the Fates, downplaying what he had actually seen, and it became noticeably shakier when he reached the part about the deity that had frightened him.

“So, the strange demigods. You mentioned seeing the god head in the same direction they went.” Kat mused, her eyes narrowed in thought.

Luke simply nodded in response.

Humming contemplatively, she glanced at them and added, “It’s a good thing you didn’t reveal anything to them; they don’t seem to be from our Camp at all.” Her eyes sparkled as she pondered aloud, “Maybe they’re not even the same type of demigod as we are…”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” Levi scoffed, crossing his arms and frowning. Glaring, he added with a stubborn set to his jaw, “What other kind of demigod could there be? And I still think we should have helped them.”

“For starters, Luke mentioned that the girl greeted you with ‘ave,’ which isn’t Greek at all.”

“So what? She could be Italian.” Levi countered weakly.

“Dude, that’s not an Italian greeting.” Luke replied dryly, easing up the longer nothing seemed to happen—no strange sounds, no war cries and definitely no divine ambushes.

“How would you know, huh?”

“I’m Brazilian, idiot. I speak Portuguese, which is a Romance language.” Rolling his eyes, he continued with a sneer, “It comes from Latin—does that ring any bells?”

Blustering a bit, Levi retorted, “That doesn’t mean she can’t be Italian. You can’t know everything about a language just because it has the same origin as your own.”

Silently, Luke grudgingly admitted that the man had a point, but it didn’t carry much weight since it ignored all the clear signs that the girl was different from them. Specifically, her oddly militaristic behavior and her use of ‘ave’ and ‘vale,’ two Latin words, as a greeting.

“It’s a possibility.” Kat interjected, clearly agreeing just to quiet Levi down. She then added pointedly, “But that doesn’t change the fact that she’s not from Camp Half-Blood and that she revealed there’s another demigod camp out there. So it raises the question: *if* they are Greek, why separate us?”

Making a face, the older man fell silent. It was plain to see he was unable to answer the question, and he didn’t look very happy about it.

“And then there was that god going after them.” Luke reminded his friends, shuddering slightly as he quickly stole a glance outside through the front windows of the car.

“Exactly.” Kat said with a smile, as if it were a thrilling mystery rather than a very real threat coming after their asses. Her eyes gleaming, she proposed, “If there are other demigods, who’s to say there aren’t other gods, too?”

Perhaps Levi was becoming overwhelmed by the conversation, because he suddenly exclaimed, eyes wide with a frenzied glint as if he were having an existential crisis, “No! There are no foreign gods, and definitely no demigod spawn of theirs! I don’t know why they’re separated from us, but they are!” His face turning red, he pointed a finger at Kat’s impassive expression. “And if foreign gods *do* exist, you should be more scared! There could be one after us right this moment!”

Calmly, *very calmly*, Katherine moved Levi's finger away from her face, and stated lightly, "Don't touch me with your dirty little hands. I can't be responsible for what might happen next."

Flinching, the other demigod hastily retreated to sit beside the younger boy, who looked increasingly annoyed by his persistent denial of reality.

"They *do* exist." Luke argued, glaring at the older man. "Don't act like you didn't see what I did. Those kids were not Greek at all."

"And what else could they be?" Levi threw his hands up in frustration.

"Roman." Kat's statement fell, causing an immediate silence in the car.

Luke hadn't expected her to realize it so quickly, but then again, Katherine was very smart and seemed weirdly fascinated by the topic.

"Then they would be sort of Greeks, wouldn't they?" Levi insisted. "Roman gods are just Greek gods with different names."

Gently touching her chin with one finger, the woman paused in thought before resting her face on her hands and mused out loud, "Are they really? When I discovered I was a demigod, the first thing I did when I got back to my mortal home was to research Greek mythology—using unbiased sources, of course. After that, I was so fascinated that I began exploring other pantheons, including the Romans. So, I can say with some confidence that the Roman gods existed long before they were associated with the Greek pantheon, and that these two were quite different, at least in the beginning."

That was something Luke hadn't known, and it was a new piece of information that made things quite concerning.

Was this place following the simplified version from the books, made to appeal to children, or was reality different? And how would that change future events?

The uncertainty left him feeling anxious.

Shaking himself out of those thoughts, Luke decided it was high time to change the topic.

"Does it *really* matter? If that god comes after us, there's not much we can do. Besides, we still need to plan how to steal the golden apple."

"Yeah, the apple. Very important." Levi quickly agreed, visibly relieved.

Sighing at having her fun interrupted, Kat rolled her eyes but complied. She straightened up and extended a hand toward Luke in a silent demand.

"Give me the map."

Soon, the three of them were sitting around it like a round-table council, planning how to conquer territories or something equally as silly.

“The Old Man said the Garden would be around here.” Levi pointed to a path leading up toward Mount Tamalpais. “It’s quite a distance away.”

Waving her hand dismissively, Kat retorted, “Luke’s father’s car will get us there in no time. Distance isn’t the issue. What we need to figure out is how we’ll deal with the dragon and the nymphs.”

That was the major challenge of the mission and what made it so difficult.

The nymphs were secondary; the real problem was Ladon.

He was said to be a massive, serpent-like dragon with a hundred heads, coiled around the tree, making it nearly impossible to approach without being noticed. On top of that, there was the fact that Book Luke had gotten his eye scar from the dragon.

But he had to have hope.

“Well, Heracles managed to trick the Bearer of the Heavens. Maybe we could do something similar?” Levi suggested, glancing at Luke as he spoke.

“You mean me.” The younger demigod stated dryly.

“Yeah. You handled the Old Man of the Sea pretty well.”

“I don’t think that Titan will be tricked so easily this time.” Kat cautioned, tapping the area where they guessed the Garden was located. “He might still be angry, and do we really want to risk holding the sky? None of us are nearly as strong as Heracles, even when he was a demigod.”

And that was without considering the possibility that the Titan might leave one of them holding the sky indefinitely, or even forever.

So, not ideal.

“Also, we can't win a fight against that dragon.” Luke warned before Levi could get any ideas. “It has a hundred heads and is venomous.”

“Then we’re fucked.” The older man declared, deflating like a popped balloon. “If we can’t trick the Titan and can’t win against the guardian of the apple, how are we supposed to get it?”

They sat in silence, studying the map and trying to devise a viable strategy.

At least, Luke and Katherine were. Levi appeared too dazed to be of any help; clearly, the day’s events had been too much for the older demigod.

As the other boy brooded, the blonde pondered their options.

Approaching the tree was a death sentence, especially with the added difficulty of retrieving the apple while evading a hundred snapping jaws very keen on eating them.

But if they could…

With a sudden snap of his fingers, Luke caught the attention of the other two teens.

"Did either of you bring a bow? Or better yet, did my father pack one for us?"

“Yeah, I have a bow.” Levi said, shaking off his daze. He stood up to fetch it, then glanced back and asked, “What’s the plan?”

A slow smile spread across Katherine’s face as she realized what the younger demigod was suggesting. She snorted, leaving Levi looking puzzled, and commented, “That might actually work.”

Gesturing for the older boy to sit back down, Luke leaned forward and explained his thought process. “We can’t just approach the tree; the dragon is there to guard it, as we all know. But what if we could get the apple from a distance?”

“You’re saying we should shoot it down from the tree.” Levi said, his eyes widening in realization. Furrowing his brows, he looked at the younger boy and asked, “But wouldn’t that damage the apple? Would it still count as a success if it’s not in perfect condition?”

Gesturing with his hands, Luke answered with a touch of satisfaction and a tiny hint of vindictiveness, “My father didn’t specify the state the apple had to be in—he just said it needed to be delivered to him.”

If Hermes wanted the fruit in perfect condition, he should have been clearer about it when making such outrageous requests to his poor son.

“I hope you’re right.” Levi muttered, eyeing his bow as if it were his salvation or doom. “Your father already doesn’t like me; if something goes wrong, he’ll probably be the first to place the blame on my feet.”

At least the other teen was self-aware enough to recognize that.

“After we shoot it, how do we get our hands on it?” Kat asked. “There's a chance the nymphs might go after the fruit—isn't that why there's another guardian for the tree? To prevent the nymphs from taking the Queen’s golden apples?”

“That’s easy. I’ll get it.” Luke replied confidently. “I’m the fastest here—faster than the nymphs. Once the apple is shot, I’ll dash in and retrieve it.”

The older demigods exchanged a glance, having a silent conversation. Finally, Katherine clasped her hands under her chin and released a heavy sigh.

“Unfortunately, that does seem to be the most logical approach. *But* we will be covering your back, and once we get there, we’ll scout the area to figure out the best way to execute our plan.”

With a frown, Luke engaged Kat in a prolonged stare-down until he finally gave in, pouting and nodding reluctantly.

In his opinion, they would only slow him down and put themselves in unnecessary danger.

While he understood their concern for his safety, he couldn't help but think it was a bit excessive. Yet, he did agree that scouting was a valid idea; it was simply good sense.

"Now that that's settled, let's have some lunch." Levi suggested, rising and heading over to his supplies. "We need to recharge, and maybe fit in another nap before we head to the Garden." He looked slightly perturbed as he muttered, "I know I definitely need it."

As Luke munched on a chicken sandwich, which he considered little more than a snack and far from *real* food—he was used to have rice, beans, meat, and a bit of salad for lunch—he began to feel a growing sense of nervousness.

Facing something so pivotal in Book Luke's life was scary. This quest had altered the boy's entire worldview and set him on a path toward self-destruction.

*But maybe,* he thought with a growing glimmer of hope inside his chest amidst the sea of anxiety, recalling that the old hag had called him an anomaly, *maybe I can change things.*

Chapter End Notes

So, Greek-Roman interactions are happening, though Luke is the only one aware of them, lol. In my head, Gwendolyn is ignoring the signs that these demigods are not from her turf because she is young, has just gone through a traumatic ordeal, and they saved her. Besides, just like poor Levi, who would think there were other kinds of demigods when you're taught only about your gods and your people? As for the way she acted, I tried to show the militaristic influence in her posture and salute—the 'Ave' greeting had some deferential connotations when addressed to superiors, so she is trying to be respectful, especially since they did save her, while 'Vale' is simply a farewell.

I only have one thing to say about the god without giving anything away: he was definitely playing around.

Katherine, being a mythology geek, is blowing the other two's minds. She isn't even that surprised; in fact, she's pretty excited about the Roman reveal. I imagine she knows a lot about other pantheons and is quite aware that Camp Half-Blood teaches things in a very biased way. However, she is very low-key and simply doesn't bother with it. When she wants to study, she goes back home to read books or papers from credible sources. Meanwhile, Levi, poor dude, is having an existential crisis. Even though he saw the signs, he is extremely defensive. And, yeah, you don't mess with Kat—she's quiet, not harmless.

And finally, the plan: they're going to get creative, and there's no certainty that it will go the way they want, but at least they have one. Shooting from far away seems better than trying to fool your great-grandpa (Atlas is Hermes' grandfather), who has already danced that dance, or throwing hands with a dragon with a hundred heads. Moreover,

Hermes really didn't specify how he wanted the apple, so… Luke is showing his crafty, petty side again.

There's something here—just a minor mention, really, easy to miss—that will be relevant in the next chapter. Can anyone guess what it is?

Anyway, thanks for reading! As always, I love to hear your thoughts! ❤️❤️❤️

# Chapter 23: Teenhood - Garden of the Hesperides

Chapter Summary

A rollercoaster of emotions and an ambush

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Luke's heart pounded wildly in his chest, so intensely that he feared it might leap from his torso and flee, just like he wished he could.

They were getting closer to the Garden of the Hesperides by the minute, and quickly.

Before him, the forest had given way to rugged gorges, with only a few blades of grass sprouting in the rocky terrain.

Everything was shrouded in a thick fog that blurred their vision, or that's how it appeared to Luke during the fleeting moments when the landscape around the mail truck wasn't distorting.

*At least,* he consoled himself, *we are well-rested after spending the afternoon napping in the car.*

They hadn't stepped out at all during that time.

Luke had to admit that, for both himself and Levi, their reluctance to leave was partly due to their fear of the creepy god appearing suddenly, like some kind of bogeyman.

Yet, when they had looked out the car windows, everything appeared normal—no monsters or deities had been in sight. This was *very* surprising, and frankly, a little suspicious, considering that three demigods in one place for an extended period of time was bound to attract unwanted attention.

But, really, it wasn't all that relevant at this point; their priority was completing the quest, which took precedence over everything else.

"We're almost at Mount Tamalpais." Kat announced, her voice cutting through the air. As she slowed down, she added, "The Mist here is very thick. I'll park nearby, and then we'll need to continue on foot to find the entrance."

Soon, she was maneuvering the car to the best of her ability into a space a short distance from the main road. The rocks and uneven terrain made it challenging, and she carefully avoided getting too close to the precipice.

Luke appreciated her caution; while they were risking their lives on a stupid quest, he wasn't eager to add falling to his death to the list of potential problems.

As soon as they parked, Kat stepped out of the mail truck without even grabbing her gear and approached the fog with a contemplative expression. Meanwhile, Luke and Levi hesitated, adjusting their equipment before following, armed and alert, and scanning their surroundings with caution.

"Interesting…" Kat murmured, her gaze fixed on a spot in the road where the fog appeared denser. If Luke's senses weren't playing tricks on him, it was also thick with the Mist.

That *might* be the entrance to the Garden.

He remembered that the closer one got to it, the denser the Mist became, which obscured the location quite well.

However, was it simply hidden, or was it in an entirely different realm, like a pocket dimension? After all, it could only be accessed in the evenings.

It was an intriguing thought exercise, though irrelevant to their current situation. Still, he couldn't help it; he was nervous, and his mind was racing, fixating on anything other than what they were about to do.

"Can you guys smell that?" Levi sniffed the air and squinted, adding, "It smells like eucalyptus."

Now that the other man mentioned it, Luke could smell it too. It was a pleasant and calming aroma, crisp and clean, reminding him of the chewing gum people used to freshen their breath.

And if this scent was here…

"We're close." Kat declared, returning to the car to quickly grab her gear and arm herself. As she adjusted her first-aid belt—equipped with both mortal supplies and demigod essentials like nectar and ambrosia—she suggested, "I think we should head toward the thickest part of the fog. The Mist here is so heavy that it's likely messing with our senses, which is why we're seeing just a regular road."

Funny that she took notice of that instead of how his father's car seemed to bend reality to travel faster.

"Do you really think it's a good idea to just waltz in without checking?" Levi asked, eyeing the road with suspicion and clear tension.

"We don't have any better options, so we need to stay silent and move carefully. And now that I've said that, keep your mouth shut." She replied, making her way to the middle of the road.

After a split second of hesitation, Kat extended her hand into one of the sheets of fog crossing the road.

The silence that followed her action was so profound that a pin could have been heard dropping to the ground.

All three of them froze, nervously watching the mist for any sign of an enraged dragon charging out to chase them. When nothing happened, Katherine took a deep breath and stepped fully into it.

Luke's breath caught as he watched the fog envelop his friend, his eyes widening when she was nowhere to be seen once it cleared.

His worry didn't last long, though, as she soon reappeared in the same spot, signaling them to follow and pressing a finger to her lips to warn them to keep quiet.

After exchanging a hesitant glance with Levi, Luke moved forward cautiously until he stood before a wall of Mist so dense it seemed almost corporeal. Watching it warily, he poked it with one finger, then quickly pulled his hand back from the strange sensation.

To his surprise, it wasn't exactly unpleasant.

He was so used to the gods' auras dominating their surroundings, heavy with intention and presence, that this almost soft sensation felt like a completely novel experience.

In a way, it seemed more *natural*—certainly more subtle.

Shaking his head, he steeled himself and took a step forward. Instantly, the Mist seemed to embrace him, sending a warm sensation through his body. Before long, his feet touched the ground on the other side, and while he was still on the same mountainside, there were some clear differences.

The road had turned to dirt, and the grass was thicker and a brighter shade of green. Up ahead, the mountain peak seemed closer, with the clouds spiraling toward it as if the sky longed to merge with the earth once more—interrupted only by Atlas, eternally burdened with the task of holding the heavens upon his shoulders.

Most notably, there was only one path forward: the Garden of the Hesperides.

It was a beautiful place, Luke had to admit. The grass shimmered silver under the setting sun, and a variety of flowers, whose names he didn't know, bloomed in such vibrant colors they appeared to glow in the shadows. The sunset bathed the scene in a vast palette of hues, making the whole view even more otherworldly.

In the center of the clearing, set some distance away and framed by black marble stones as if it were a work of art, stood a massive apple tree, towering above everything around them—easily the size of a five-story building.

There, hanging from its branches, were their targets: the golden apples. They gleamed like polished metal, their smooth, enticing surface made even more irresistible by their intoxicating fragrance.

The apples appeared so appetizing that Luke felt he would forever regret not reaching out and taking a bite.

Before he could even think about doing something so utterly stupid, it quickly became clear why Katherine had silently signaled them to be quiet.

Coiled around the trunk was a colossal, snake-like creature, its serpentine body as thick as the tree it guarded, with countless heads fused together at the neck, resembling a nightmarish pseudo-octopus. The monster appeared to be asleep, or at least some of its heads were, while others languidly chewed on leaves that smelled suspiciously like the eucalyptus scent the demigods had noticed as they neared the Garden.

In short, Ladon looked like a grotesque science experiment gone wrong.

“Holy shit.” Levi whispered, his hands gripping his bow so tightly they turned white, his eyes fixed on the dragon with obvious fear.

Quietly, Luke moved closer to the other man, silently offering support. He couldn’t deny that part of his reason was the intimidation he felt from the sight.

“Strange…” Katherine murmured, her eyes scanning the landscape as if searching for something.

Shrugging it off but still keeping a wary eye out, she signaled for them to move closer.

They took cover behind some rocks, reluctant to advance any further toward the Garden.

“The place is too open.” Luke hissed as they formed a tight circle, speaking in low tones while standing close together.

Kat stole another glance at the tree before crouching back down and whispering, “On one hand, it’ll make your job easier since there’ll be fewer obstacles during your run.” She narrowed her eyes and huffed. “On the other hand, finding a discreet spot to shoot from without getting spotted will be tough.”

“How good are you with a bow, Levi?” Luke asked, though he already knew the other demigod was a pretty good shot, nervously peering over the rock.

If only they had a rope…but it would create too much drag, and Levi wasn’t skilled enough to make it work.

Besides, the growing shadows made it difficult to see, and he wasn’t sure if the dragon had night vision, which made their task more complicated but not impossible—*he had to believe that*.

“Better than you, but worse than the Cabin Seven kids.” The older man replied, his hands trembling as he valiantly tried to steady them.

Luke sincerely hoped he succeeded—otherwise, they were screwed.

“Do you think you can shoot from here?”

“No.” Levi said, glancing into the distance as if mentally calculating the range. “For an accurate shot, I’ll need to get a bit closer.”

“That thing seems to be distracted.” Katherine observed thoughtfully. “If we move quickly, we might be able to grab the apple and get out before it notices.”

It was true to some extent, but it was still a risky move.

Ladon was sprawled around the tree, his many heads resting on the ground like a tangled nest of pythons. Even though none of the heads had their eyes open, a few were still chewing—Luke wasn’t sure if the dragon was actually asleep or if he was displaying some kind of sleepwalking behavior.

And he wasn’t particularly eager to find out either.

But what other choice did he have?

Surveying the area, the blonde spotted a few more rocks further ahead, closer to the shadows and the center of the clearing. Although they wouldn’t offer perfect cover, they could provide a decent spot for shooting in the meantime.

“There.” Luke pointed out his find to the other demigods.

Once his friends nodded, they carefully crept toward it, freezing still every time the dragon so much as twitched.

When Luke reached the spot, he crouched low and carefully scanned the area for any signs of danger. Despite seeing nothing but the overgrown lizard, he couldn't shake the feeling that they were being watched.

Shaking off the uneasy feeling, he focused on Levi, who positioned himself against the rock and took a moment to steady his breathing. Gradually, the older man’s hands stopped trembling, and he glanced at the other two demigods, giving them a nod.

“I’m as ready as I’ll ever be.”

Luke positioned himself and waited as Levi drew his bow. Nervous energy built up inside him, and doubt gnawed at his insides—would this actually work? If it didn't, what would happen to them?

He didn’t have much time to dwell on his anxiety, though, as the arrow soared through the air and struck the apple dead center.

As soon as the fruit was knocked away, Luke moved into action, carefully circling the surprisingly still-dozing monster.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw shadows flickering nearby and glimpsed figures darting ahead of him—*almost as if they’d been waiting for it*—sprinting toward the same direction

with surprising speed and shoving each other roughly.

Narrowing his eyes, Luke quickened his pace and managed to outrun them after a few precious seconds—*too precious*—capturing their attention in the process.

Silently agreeing on a plan of action, they abruptly stopped their tussle to focus on him. They reached out to grab his shirt and tried to trip him, but he was too fast for their attempts.

“Beware, tis a son of the Messenger, sisters!” One of them called out in warning, causing them to quickly adjust their strategy.

One by one, they vanished into the shadows, seemingly giving up on their chase. Although Luke was wary of what they might do next, he couldn’t afford to stop running now.

He *had* to get the treasure before its guardian woke up and decided he and his friends would make good snacks.

However, just as he was about to grab it, relief already flooding his veins, a violent shove from the side threw him off balance.

Moving too fast to stop, he was sent tumbling and rolling uncontrollably across the ground.

Dazed, he struggled to get up and saw four women wrestling over the golden apple. Dressed in white Ancient Greek chitons, they looked like relics from another era, frozen in time just like this Garden.

While appearing delicate—with caramel skin and dark, lustrous hair cascading over their shoulders—the nymphs were vicious. They yanked at each other’s silky locks and shoved one another whenever someone managed to grab hold of the fruit.

Cursing under his breath, Luke prepared himself to leap into the fray and seize the apple. But a flicker of movement at the edge of his vision halted him.

Another arrow was loosed, though less accurately than before, causing the apple to land much closer to the dragon.

He hesitated for a moment, eyeing the brawling nymphs with fearful consideration. Despite their aggression, they seemed a lot less dangerous than the massive reptile guarding the tree, and certainly more easily defeated.

However, joining the fight would waste valuable time with no guarantee of success, and there was always the risk that they would wake the dragon at any moment.

Choosing his poison, Luke took a deep breath, braced his legs, and sprang forward to snatch the other apple.

As soon as he grabbed it, things started to go wrong.

The first problem was that the nymphs quickly noticed what was happening. Stopping to glare at him before shifting their focus to the fruit in his hands with hungry, greedy eyes.

Seizing her chance, one of the young women grabbed the apple they had been fighting over. So captivated was she by her hard-won treasure that she didn't pursue after Luke, leaving her to stay behind while the other three gave chase.

Muttering curses under his breath, he sped toward his friends, spotting Katherine heading his way with a spear in hand and a ferocious expression on her face. Meanwhile, Levi readied his bow once more, his eyes locked on the frenzied group of women chasing after the younger demigod.

Every time an arrow flew too close, the nymphs would retreat into the shadows, their laughter echoing mockingly at Kat, who jabbed at the empty spaces they had just occupied with growing frustration. Despite the other demigods' efforts, the women remained relentless in their pursuit of Luke.

The nymphs had clearly learned from their previous mistakes. Instead of trying to outrun him, they spread out, with the closest ones advancing whenever he came too near. It was as if they were a pride of lionesses working in perfect coordination to drive their prey into an ambush.

The second problem was that Ladon was stirring awake, a hundred jaws opening and tasting the air, and the nymphs were deliberately driving the blonde straight toward him.

Deciding that dealing with a pack of nature spirits was far easier than confronting a dragon, Luke quickly pivoted. Crouching slightly to prepare for a sprint, he secured the fruit under his arm and set his sights on a nymph in his path—the one closest in size to himself.

Her wide eyes and momentary pause betrayed her shock as Luke, shifting his weight, drove his shoulder into her torso with force, sending her crashing to the ground.

Without slowing down once, he bolted toward Levi.

Behind him, another woman's pained cry of 'Barbarian!' pierced the air. A quick glance revealed that Kat had landed a hit, viciously defending his back from the remaining enemies while keeping pace with him to ensure his escape.

But, just as he neared his friend, the worst possible scenario happened.

"Ladon, arise!" The fallen nymph's scream echoed through the space, her eyes blazing with fury at the blonde. "Scoundrels! Base and wretched thieves have purloined the Queen's golden apples!"

Time seemed to stand still as the dragon's eyes snapped open—each of his hundred heads revealing red orbs with slitted pupils. They scanned the space before focusing on Luke with a chilling intensity.

With a malicious glare, Ladon uncoiled from his tangled embrace with the apple tree, lifting his heads one by one. Each head bared its lips, revealing massive fangs as long as Luke's forearm.

As the dragon stretched to his full, terrifying size, the demigod felt a wave of dizziness wash over him, almost as if he were on the brink of passing out from sheer terror.

“Luke! Run!” Levi’s panicked voice pulled him from his shock.

With adrenaline pumping through his veins, prompting him to move with increased urgency, the blonde pushed his legs to sprint as fast as he could.

He caught the stench before he even saw the dragon approaching.

The foul, acidic odor—like a rotting corpse lodged itself in Ladon’s throat for far longer than it should have—made his eyes water and his head spin, causing him to stumble in confusion for a moment before regaining control of his legs.

But his brief blunder was enough to leave him surrounded by at least a dozen heads the size of cars, each glaring at him with evident hostility.

He barely had time to widen his eyes before they began snapping at him, forcing him to use every ounce of his agility and flexibility to navigate through the writhing mass of obstacles eager to devour him—each head so large it seemed capable of swallowing him whole.

Desperately maneuvering to escape the relentless dragon, Luke’s eyes darted around for any possible escape when he spotted *the* nymph still frozen in fascination at the place where she had snatched the other golden apple.

She seemed lost in her own world, staring at the fruit in her hands as if unable to believe it was really there.

Not thinking too much about it but frantically hoping it would work, Luke redirected his path toward her.

He leaped over Ladon’s heads, using them as stepping stones to dodge the others, twisting in midair and rolling smoothly as he landed. Using the momentum, he slid under a snapping jaw that missed him by mere centimeters.

Quickly, the demigod rushed to the dazed woman, pausing only when he was right behind her. This caused the dragon to hesitate in its attacks, not wanting to risk harming her.

“Look, Ladon!” Luke screamed, his voice tinged with hysteria as he pointed to the gleaming golden apple in the nymph’s hands. The sound seemed to rouse her from her trance, making her blink slowly as if waking from a long dream. “Another thief! One of your own, no less!”

The dragon recoiled, swaying in place as if unsure how to proceed. Some of his heads snapped at the air while others hissed in a lamenting sound, perhaps even expressing a hint of betrayal.

“No!” The nymph cried out in fear, finally shaking off her daze. “It is not as it seems, my dear dragon! Tis but a deceit, *a deceit*!”

Yet, even as she pleaded her innocence, her hands never stopped clutching the apple tightly.

Without wasting any time, Luke eagerly took advantage of the distraction and bolted toward his friends, who were busy fighting off the remaining women blocking their way and preventing them from helping him.

While the demigod ran, he ignored the traitorous nymph's wails as she tried to explain herself to Ladon, feeling little pity for someone who would have gladly thrown him into the dragon's maw just to get half a chance to put her hands on the forbidden fruit.

Besides, he didn't believe the overgrown lizard would *actually* harm her.

Focusing on the remaining enemies, Luke narrowed his eyes and prepared himself. He secured the apple under one arm and slid along the ground, using the resulting force to roll into position. At the same time, he extended his leg, tripping one of the nymphs who had been overwhelming Levi—now wielding a sword with his bow nowhere in sight.

The woman promptly lost her balance, allowing the older man to knock her out with the blunt side of his sword.

However, that small victory did not last long. The sister of the defeated nymph—who had been tag-teaming Levi with her—let out an angry screech before launching herself at the blonde. He recognized her as the one he had thrown to the ground earlier, the one who had awakened Ladon.

Still furious, she slashed the air in a frenzy, seeming to ignore the golden fruit as she focused on trying to get rid of him first.

"Retreat! Retreat *now*! We got the apple!" Luke shouted to the other two demigods, evading the enraged woman while his friend attempted to defend him with little success.

Unfortunately, the blonde's shout had the side effect of catching Ladon's attention. Though his body remained facing forward, the dragon turned his heads toward them, hissing in fury as he realized how close they were to leaving.

Urging Katherine to move faster with hasty gestures, Luke kept a panicked eye on the dragon, which was drawing closer and closer.

Despite his terror, he wasn't willing to abandon his friends—both of them. Thus, he stayed behind to ensure their safety, knowing that, since he held the apple, Ladon would focus on him.

This way, he could distract the oversized mutant lizard long enough for his friends to escape. They were just a short distance from the exit, so he felt he could manage.

*It was so close—freedom, safety, and victory.*

However, he had, *very stupidly*, overlooked the nymphs while focusing on the greater threat.

Before he could even understand what was happening, a beautiful sound rang out across the Garden—a symphony of voices so sweet and enchanting that it made him forget where he was for a moment.

They seemed to beckon him, inviting him to join them in dance—perhaps indefinitely, even forever.

In a daze, Luke felt a strange warmth and softness on his head, as if a hidden demon were whispering suggestions in his ear. With a sudden realization, he slapped himself in the face to break free from the spell's effects.

Having abandoned their chase, the nymphs had gathered behind Ladon, including the one who had taken the other apple, which was now nowhere in sight. With their hands joined, they sang, their voices infused with magic as they manipulated the melody to lure the demigods toward their deaths.

Unfortunately, even if Luke had noticed the effects before being fully ensnared by the magic, he noted with a faint sense of despair that his brief moment of distraction might have lasted longer than he realized.

Ladon loomed in front of him, his massive body blocking the faint moonlight and casting the demigod in shadow. The dragon's hateful red eyes, glowing more demonically in the darkness, fixed on the boy with burning savagery and a hint of smug triumph.

Paralyzed by fear, Luke's wide eyes watched in slow motion as the creature lifted one enormous foot, each claw three times his size and glinting with a cruel sharpness under the moonlight.

He knew that if it came down, he would be torn to pieces, but despite this, his legs refused to move, trembling so violently that it was a miracle he managed to stay on his feet.

As the dragon's foot began its descent, Luke closed his eyes tightly and braced for the inevitable.

His life flashed behind his lids as he wondered if fate had truly changed—but, this time, instead of a facial scar, it would claim his life.

*If I die here, will I get to meet Aubrey?*

An invisible string seemed to pull inside his head, and he could almost hear the cackling of those old hags.

But then, suddenly, he was shoved aside, and a pained scream filled his ears.

Opening his eyes, Luke saw that Levi, his dear, brave, and *stupid* friend, had pushed him out of harm's way, taking a glancing strike on the process.

Reacting purely on instinct before he could fully process his actions, Luke caught the older man before he hit the ground, draping Levi's arm over his shoulders and clutching the apple tightly with his other hand.

As if driven by an unseen force, he took advantage of the brief moment the dragon stared at them in surprise—maybe because the demigods weren't dead—quickly marching away while doing his best to avoid causing more pain to the injured demigod.

The music had long ceased, and the nymphs were nowhere to be seen, no longer pursuing them.

Only Ladon, having apparently regained his wits, stubbornly continued the chase. The foul odor of his breath was the only sign Luke had of the dragon's proximity, as he didn't dare look back.

Fueled by desperation, the blonde pressed on toward the exit, even as he increasingly noticed the putrid smell growing closer and closer.

However, before he could lose hope, something flew overhead, and soon a reptilian screech of pain reverberated through the space.

"Come on! Faster!" Kat's voice urged from near the area where the Mist was stronger. She remained poised in a throwing position, though her spear was nowhere in sight—belatedly, Luke realized that it was the weapon he had seen slicing through the air moments before.

Increasing his pace, he pulled himself and Levi along as quickly as possible, feeling the ground tremble and hearing the crash of rocks being broken as Ladon's agonized roars filled the air.

With a profound sense of relief, Luke reached the Garden's limits, Kat quickly moving to help him support Levi.

The last thing he saw before crossing the invisible barrier was the nymphs struggling to remove something embedded deep inside one of Ladon's eyes. Then the Mist enveloped him, and before he knew it, he was back on the road, with their car just a short distance away.

Dragging himself to the mail truck, the weight of his injured friend seeming heavier now that the adrenaline had left his senses—even with Katherine supporting the man's other side—Luke felt disbelief wash over him as he grasped the apple still tightly clutched in his hand.

He did it; he *actually* did it.

However, as they struggled to lay Levi on the blanket in the back of the car, Luke's growing happiness was replaced by a profound sense of shock when he finally caught sight of the extent of his friend's wounds.

The older man's torso was drenched in blood, the red stains completely obscuring the original color of his shirt. Levi's chest bore three enormous gashes: one beginning at a visibly broken collarbone, another running across his stomach and ending near his hip.

The wounds were so deep that Luke, feeling queasy, could see bone through the torn flesh and catch glimpses of what might be the other demigod's entrails.

With his heart clenched, the blonde could only watch in helplessness as a frantic Katherine kept one hand on Levi's shoulder, chanting urgently, while her other hand scrambled through her first aid kit for nectar.

After finding the drink of the gods, she gently dripped several drops into his mouth—more than the blonde had ever seen used before—then set the vial aside. With both hands now free, she placed them on the blood-soaked, crimson-stained chest of the injured man, her brows furrowing.

Luke stared, feeling useless, as a bead of sweat traced down her face from the effort. Her chanting continued without pause, the words blending together until they were little more than a continuous hum inside the car.

Much to his relief, it seemed to be working: Levi's wounds appeared less severe, and he seemed to breathe a bit easier, his unfocused eyes blinking blearily in their general direction.

Grasping the other man's hands and rubbing them between his own to warm them—leaving the golden apple forgotten beside him—Luke frowned and whispered, "You're an *idiot*. You shouldn't have taken that risk."

Levi gave a weak chuckle, his face contorting with discomfort as even that small effort seemed to hurt him. Though he seemed to be in less agony than before—thanks to Katherine's glowing hands working to dull his pain and heal him—he remained weak, and his wounds were still serious.

"Princess…needed a hero." Levi murmured with effort, his voice raspy and strained. Weakly, he attempted to tighten his grip on Luke's hands, turning his head slowly to meet the younger boy's gaze with a determined expression. "I saw too…"

Furrowing his brows in confusion, the blonde patted the other man's hands comfortingly. He didn't fully understand what Levi wanted to say but wasn't willing to force him to talk—the act seemed to take too much out of his friend.

However, Levi chose to speak again.

Appearing a little puzzled, he frowned slightly, and the words he uttered filled Luke with a deep sense of dread, making the world around him feel frozen and his ears ring.

"W-why is it so cold?"

"Katherine!" Luke cried out in dismay, desperately trying to warm Levi's hands while his wide eyes watched the man's lips turn blue and his shaking grow more intense.

She didn't reply, but her chants grew more frantic, causing the light in her hands to intensify as she poured all her energy into saving their friend.

But it didn't seem to be working anymore.

"Lukey." Levi's faint voice reached him, prompting the blonde to try and hush him, urging him to conserve his energy. Despite his attempt, the other man's glazed eyes held a resolute gaze as he continued, "Don't cry…this is how it must be."

"No! It isn't!" Luke exclaimed, tears streaming down his face. He turned to Kat, his voice breaking with desperation as he screamed, "Give him more nectar! Ambrosia! Do

something!”

“I can’t!” She snapped, halting her chant as it seemed to do little more than reduce the bleeding. Staring at him with a look of utter despair, she whispered, “I can’t. *He’ll burn*.”

“A life for a life…” Levi continued muttering as if he could no longer hear the desperate pleas around him, his unseeing eyes fixed on the car’s ceiling.

Suddenly, a brilliant light appeared above the dying man. Luke squinted against its intensity, struggling to see until the light dimmed. When it finally did, he saw that a bright red broken wheel had materialized above Levi, glowing vividly in the confined space.

“Finally…” Levi whispered, staring at the light with a heartbreaking smile. He then tried to squeeze Luke’s hand to get his attention. “W-who is it? I…I can’t see.”

Swallowing back his tears, the younger demigod answered, “Nemesis.”

“My mother…” Levi seemed to grow paler and weaker, but it couldn’t hide the glowing happiness of being claimed after six years of silence. “Please…can you—”

He was interrupted by a violent coughing fit, blood spilling from his mouth as he struggled to catch his breath.

“Of course.” Luke agreed quietly, his eyes filled with sadness, while Katherine turned her face away, hiding her tears.

“It is determined.” He struggled to steady his voice, striving to give the words the weight they deserved, honoring his friend's final wish. “Nemesis. Dark-faced. Justice-spawned. Inescapable. Hail, Levi West, son of the Judge.”

Smiling one final time, Levi’s eyes now sightless, he squeezed both of his friends’ hands and whispered, “Thank you.”

Then, he sighed deeply, and his chest no longer rose.

Silence lingered for a long time after Levi’s death, interrupted only by the soft sniffling of Luke and Kat as they gazed at their friend’s lifeless body with desolate expressions.

Pulling herself together, Katherine wiped her hands clean and used her arm to dry her tears. After a moment's hesitation, she gently closed Levi's empty eyes—*he was so full of life just moments ago*—and placed drachmas over them, as well as one on his mouth.

“Come, Luke. Keep me company.” She suggested, standing up and placing a hand on his shoulder, trying to guide him toward the seat beside the driver’s.

He shook his head and gently brushed her hand away.

“I’ll stay here.” Before she could voice her concern, he added, “Just…for a minute. I’ll be there in a second.”

Katherine studied Luke for a moment, her concern evident in her gaze, though her own grief was well hidden behind it. After a deep sigh, she gave a reluctant nod and moved to the front of the car. With a quick motion, she started the engine, causing the vehicle to roar to life.

Soon, they were back on the road.

Hesitating, Luke pulled his backpack closer and opened it, rummaging through its contents.

When he found his blanket—an old, well-loved thing as old as he was—he rose on unsteady feet. He carefully draped it over Levi, his gaze lingering on his friend's face for a long while before he finally covered it completely.

Then, he walked to the front and sat down next to Katherine. She gave him a fleeting look of acknowledgment but didn't say anything—both were too stunned and emotionally raw to engage in any meaningful conversation.

Still in shock, Luke rested his chin on his hand and gazed blankly out the window, his mind drifting. He had lost track of how long they had been traveling or where they were; the world outside the car blurred and shifted, barely registering in his state.

Just then, a sudden sound jolted him from his daze.

A loud pop echoed from beneath the mail truck, followed by a hissing noise. The vehicle shuddered, its speed dropping sharply as it began to sway. Kat, muttering curses under her breath, fought to maintain control and quickly maneuvered the car to the side of the street, parking with urgency.

"Damn it! Not now!" She hissed in frustration. In a sudden fit of fury, she slammed her hands on the steering wheel, making the horn blare. Rubbing her face in exasperation, Kat turned to Luke and said, "I think the tire's blown. I'm going to check it." Pointing a stern finger at him, she added, "Do *not* leave the car under any circumstances. Am I clear?"

"Crystal." He replied, his brow furrowing at the strangeness of the situation. He watched as Kat nearly tripped while stepping out of the vehicle, swearing profusely under her breath.

Resting his cheek on his hand, Luke narrowed his eyes in thought as he stared at the dimly lit surroundings, waiting for the older woman to return. The only light came from a few ceiling lamps, revealing that they were in what he suspected was an underpass tunnel.

Was the Hermes Express truck malfunctioning? Did his father give them a faulty car?

It seemed too bizarre to entertain that idea.

What could Hermes possibly gain by sabotaging them like this? Luke's success would reflect positively on his father, so undermining his quest in any way would only be counterproductive.

Frowning, he also took notice that Katherine was taking way too long to come back and that the outside was eerily silent and empty—there were no cars, no people, not even one measly rat.

Luke debated with himself in silence as he stared out the windows, trying to spot anything unusual. From his vantage point, however, he couldn't see anything new—only the same weirdness he had already noticed.

Maybe she was behind the truck? But that would mean he'd only see her if he stepped out, and she had given him strict instructions not to leave.

However, his worry only deepened the longer Katherine stayed outside, intensified by the lifeless body of his childhood friend in the back of the car.

What if she was in danger?

He couldn't bear the thought of losing anyone else—especially not so soon.

Anxiously running a hand through his hair, Luke muttered a silent apology for disobeying her.

With caution, he opened the car doors, darting his eyes around the surroundings as he did.

The area was dark and unnervingly empty. By his calculations, it wasn't very late, and he still assumed they were in San Francisco, so there should be more cars passing by. Yet, none were in sight.

He didn't think they had crossed a Mist barrier like the one in the Garden of the Hesperides that would transport them to a hidden mythical place; the surroundings still seemed like an ordinary mortal tunnel, just eerily deserted.

Not finding anything new or his missing friend, Luke stepped out nervously. He kept one hand pressed against the car for support as he circled to the back.

There, he crouched and examined the tire, noting a single, perfect puncture. The projectile was missing, leaving him uncertain whether it was a rock—though he doubted a god's vehicle would be damaged by a mere stone—or something else, possibly done intentionally.

And Katherine was nowhere to be seen either.

Rising slowly with his gaze still fixed on the hole, Luke continued to circle the car with increased caution.

*If this was done on purpose,* he thought with growing distress*, the culprit couldn't have been weak.*

It wasn't an ordinary—much less a mortal—person who could damage something of divine origin.

As he reached the opposite side of the mail truck without finding her, his anxiety grew. When he turned around to retrace his steps, he was startled to see her—she hadn't been there just moments before.

With wide eyes, he stared at the woman lying on the ground, alarmed. Then, he sighed in relief when he saw her chest rising slowly.

Katherine was still breathing.

“She’s just sleeping.” A deep, suave voice announced, each word articulated with deliberation, like an experienced narrator capturing attention without effort.

Emerging from the shadows behind Kat, a young man walked out—the same man Luke had seen earlier that day, who had filled him with terror.

He was, quite frankly, intimidating in height, slightly taller than Luke’s own father, making him a full head taller than the demigod himself.

Despite his imposing stature, he appeared…friendly, with a carefully placed smile on his lips.

Now that he was closer, Luke could see the god’s features in more detail. He was quite handsome—as all deities tended to be—with styled, wavy brown hair, a strong jawline, high cheekbones, a light olive complexion, and a youthful appearance, as if he had just come of age, although that was far from the truth.

Though his smile was meant to be welcoming, the dim lighting cast shadows across his face, giving him an unsettling, slightly sinister look. Furthermore, Luke's inability to make out his eyes only deepened his growing sense of unease.

“Now, won’t you greet me properly, mortal?” The unknown deity drawled pleasantly, sitting in an opulent office chair made of high-end leather—an out-of-place luxury that had appeared suddenly in the middle of the tunnel.

Stuttering slightly, Luke remained rooted to the spot, pressing his hand tightly against the Hermes Express logo. His voice came out weak and hesitant as he managed to whisper, “Good night, sir.”

“I didn’t quite catch that. Perhaps you should come a little closer to offer your greetings properly.” The god suggested, his smile still fixed on his face. Though his tone was light, it sounded more like a demand to the blonde’s ears.

“Good night, sir.” Luke repeated more assuredly and a little louder, but he remained rooted to his spot, wary of approaching a foreign god whose identity he still didn’t know.

The man’s expression froze for a moment as his eyes shifted to the hand pressed against the car. For a brief instant, the demigod thought he detected a chill in the deity’s demeanor, though it happened so quickly it might have simply been his imagination.

But even so, the man didn’t rise or approach Luke. Instead, he tilted his head contemplatively and hummed softly.

Leaning down, the man gently twirled a lock of Katherine’s hair between his fingers, casting a sideways glance at the blonde. His smile shifted into a smirk as he asked, “Are you quite certain you wouldn’t prefer to come a little closer?”

Luke's gaze fixed on the hand resting on Katherine's head, and without fully thinking about his words, he snarled, "Don't you *dare*—"

Several things happened in quick succession the moment Luke stepped out of reach of the mail truck: the god's smile widened unnaturally, revealing all his teeth; the demigod realized the grave mistake he had just made; and then, before he could even blink, he was slammed against the tunnel wall.

Gripping the hand around his throat desperately, though the hold was neither tight nor painful, Luke looked up at the god. For the first time, he saw the deity's eyes—chestnut brown with flecks of green.

They might have seemed warm, if not for the calculating gleam and coldness behind them—a glaring lack of something essential. The way they looked at Luke held a deep sense of curiosity, though there was also a hint of…satisfaction.

"Maybe I should teach you *respect*." The man whispered.

As soon as he said that, the aura of the god made itself known, heavy with intent and clearly not bothering to lower its intensity for the puny mortal's comfort at all. It seemed like an announcement, unlike those of the Greek gods he knew, who were much more careful about showing their powers to mortals.

Surprisingly, he hadn't realized until this moment how much they had been holding back.

The aura slithered toward him slowly, with a certain measuring quality as if it were weighing his worth on a scale. Also, it was clearly toying with him, causing the blonde to tremble, and the effect grew more intense when it finally made contact.

It seemed to want to burrow beneath his skin, dig through him until it reached the deepest parts of his being.

Pain and fear brought tears to Luke's eyes as he felt the aura gradually fill every part of him, scrutinizing everything—perhaps even seeing his soul, his flesh, everything that made him who he was.

*It hurts. Its hurts. It hurts.*

With a jolt, he tried to free himself, clawing blindly, but to no avail; the hand easily adjusted to hold him more firmly. Then he felt the aura retreating, taking something with it—he didn't know what, but he knew it was *his*.

Abruptly, it paused, then shuddered with renewed interest, as if delighted. Suddenly, the pain faded, and the sensation softened, allowing Luke to breathe again.

He hadn't realized he had been crying so much that he was struggling for air.

Although the aura didn't leave at once, it rubbed against him with a different *intent*—not painful, nor overwhelming, but no less distressing.

When it finally continued with its withdrawal, it didn't release what it had taken; instead, it held it closer, as if it were a precious treasure, leaving a part of itself behind as well.

This made him squirm in discomfort.

"How sweet." The god crooned, his eyes tracking the falling tears. "You *really* are such a sensitive little darling."

Shuddering at the god's unsettling words, the blonde avoided eye contact and tried to gauge the distance to Katherine and his father's car, both behind the deity.

Suddenly, the god loosened his grip on Luke's neck and, with a firm hold on his chin, tilted the demigod's head up, forcing him to meet his gaze directly.

"Now, now, isn't it rather rude to ignore someone who's speaking to you?" The deity chided, his tone more amused than offended, though a suppressed hint of displeasure still lingered beneath the surface.

"Forgive me, sir." Luke uttered softly, his hands trembling as he clutched the ends of his shirt.

Brushing off the apology he had practically demanded, the god mused aloud, his eyes gleaming with interest, "I wonder what your father is thinking, allowing you to wander about like this."

Confused by what that could possibly mean, the blonde furrowed his brows and warily stared at the man before him. Though the god's gaze took on a devilish edge, his smile stayed deceptively friendly.

Everything about him suggested trustworthiness and warmth, but it was clear he was anything but.

"Doesn't he realize," the man leaned in to whisper next to his ear, "that his precious little jewel might get…taken?"

Alarm surged through Luke's mind.

He curled into himself, pushing against the deity's chest with all his strength. Surprisingly, the god allowed it, leaning back as the demigod tried to create some distance.

It was as if he had been momentarily distracted; the man's whole face twitched, his attention shifting away from Luke. A glazed look passed over his eyes before he snapped back to himself and glowered darkly at nothing, clearly profoundly irritated.

*What the hell?*

Turning back to the blonde, the god masked his momentarily loss of composure with a pleasant expression, as if nothing had happened. He smirked and declared, "Regrettably, that would be rather inconvenient, especially after all the effort put into separating my people from yours."

Still perplexed by the strange behavior, Luke hesitated, nervously wetting his lips as he asked, “Is that related to whatever you did to my friend?”

Were his memories going to be erased? Was that what the aura had been doing before it seemed to stop for some unknown reason?

Also, this Roman god was far too creepy for his comfort, as if he were trying to mimic human behavior but missing the mark in a way that felt deeply off.

“Yes.” The god replied bluntly. Tilting his head, he added, “You cannot be allowed to remember the soldiers you saved.” Stalking closer, he smiled with practiced ease and offered a hollow comfort. “It won’t hurt, or at least, it’s not meant to.” Abruptly pausing as if struck by an idea, he glanced at the demigod with a flicker of something in his brown eyes that Luke didn’t like. “But I wouldn’t be entirely opposed to an…understanding.”

*Understanding?*

Stepping back, only to be halted by the wall behind him, Luke tried to think quickly. With a swift glance at the car, he decided to attempt a distraction, hoping to buy himself some time.

“May I have the honor of knowing the Lord’s name?” He asked, attempting to inch away while still pressed against the wall.

The mail truck wasn’t far off, and he hoped the god would hesitate. After all, the deity had tried to lure him away from the vehicle instead of just taking him, so Luke was betting on the god being reluctant to step too close to it.

And if he ran there as quickly as possible…

It reeked of desperation, but what else could he do in this situation?

Pausing to study Luke with a contemplative gaze, making the blonde freeze and remain as still as he could—almost as if he could become invisible—the man held the silence for a moment before breaking it with a thoughtful hum, as if considering whether divulging more would align with his interests.

Smiling enigmatically, he said at last, “I could grant you this honor, but it would be far more rewarding for you to uncover it yourself. You seem capable enough.”

“But how can I offer proper respect or avoid offending you without knowing your identity, sir?” Luke pressed on, daring to continue his escape attempt as the god watched him with an unchanging smile and no visible reaction.

Yet, his warm brown eyes were so very cold.

“Why this sudden wish to please a god not of your own people, *Lucas*?” The deity retorted, amusement lacing his tone as he observed the demigod freeze in his attempt to flee at the mention of his name—the one his grandmother had insisted on.

“How do you know that name?” The blonde asked, his voice little more than a whisper.

No one knew that name—no one except his mortal family.

“I know many things.” The god drawled, gliding closer with a relaxed elegance. “For instance, I’m aware you were making a rather charming attempt to slip into that mail truck before I could catch you.”

Frozen in place, Luke remained silent with wide eyes as the deity cradled his face in his hands, the gesture surprisingly tender.

“Unfortunately, that strategy would inevitably fail.” The Roman continued with a sigh, a hint of mockery in his tone. His eyes glowed with power, and his aura swirled around him with such intensity that it was almost visible to the naked eye. “After all, I’m a god, mortal.”

Tears welled up in Luke’s eyes again.

The day had already been filled with so many tragedies, and now this god was toying with him—dangling a sliver of hope before him only to snuff it out, making it very clear that the blonde was neither powerful nor fast enough to reach it.

“I’ve made my decision.” The god declared suddenly, his gaze lingering on the demigod’s face with that unsettling, intense fascination yet again. He then moved one hand, placing his fingers over Luke’s eyes, blocking his vision, while his aura wrapped around the demigod with an uncharacteristic gentleness.

A moment of stillness followed before the world began to blur at the edges, fading as his vision dimmed.

Through the approaching darkness, he heard one last thing, gradually growing fainter, before he lost consciousness.

“I want you to remember me, *Graecus*.”

Chapter End Notes

I tried to make retrieving the apple really difficult since it was one of Hercules’ labors; it couldn’t be something easy. Besides, our dream team also made mistakes; they’re not perfect, just human, with limited experience in such matters and feeling deeply frightened. Case in point: they forgot about the nymphs. Those ladies hid, hoping to get the apple themselves because, in the myths, Hera doesn’t trust them with her golden apples either. So, I thought, why not make them want to get their hands on it too? Additionally, they’re quite strong, being daughters of Atlas—who doesn’t appear because he’s at the mountaintop while the Garden is on the path toward it.

As for Levi's death, someone had to die. The quest was far too difficult not to cause some tragedy. It was a very sad scene to write, and I think it fits with his character—a guy who is impulsive but just and loyal. As for why the healing didn’t work, the damage

was far too extensive, and there was the poison as well. The claiming scene, where his godly parent is revealed to be Nemesis, the goddess of retribution, fits well with the theme. It highlights how these children suffer and desperately seek acknowledgment from their parents, as well as how minor gods are often ignored, leading to them not claiming their children. But Nemesis did end up claiming Levi after he did something that was coherent with her domains.

Regarding the Roman pantheon, from my research, they were initially something akin to nature spirits and became more anthropomorphic with Etruscan and later Greek influences. Adding to this, the books, if I'm recalling it right, mention that the Roman gods were more powerful (the Roman Empire thing I think) and less amiable. Thus, we have gods who are very intimidating and that don't quite know how to Human very well.

In our mystery god's case, he is trying to teach Luke a lesson, as he himself mentioned with the respect thing, and he is being, dare I say it, a little playful about it, certainly less strict than he's capable of. In his mind, he is acting in a perfectly acceptable way, even making an effort to be friendlier than usual (quite obviously forced), toward the little fascinating mortal he has caught. I admit, I love writing this guy; his creepiness and fakeness are very engaging. I'm eager to see what you'll deduce about his identity and motives, which are quite numerous. I've sprinkled in some clues, though I might have made them a bit too obvious…

The relevant mention in the last chapter was about the mail truck—it's part of Hermes' domain; so Luke's thought that the car wouldn't be able to stop a deity was somewhat wrong.

Anyway, thank you all for reading! Feel free to leave a comment if you feel like it; I appreciate all feedback. Latecomers, don't be shy! ❤️❤️❤️

# Chapter 24: Teenhood - Awakened

Chapter Summary

Back at Camp, with a side of gossip, a lot of gossip

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Luke woke up gradually, feeling a bit lost, as if emerging from a long dream—a rare and quite worrying sensation.

But it wasn't really a dream, or at least he didn't think so.

If he made an effort, the blonde could almost recall flashes of moments where he had felt awake but oddly dazed, as though a veil were obscuring his senses and making reality seem strangely fragmented.

When he finally opened his eyes, feeling confused, the first thing he saw was a familiar wooden ceiling. As he turned his head slowly, the effort more taxing than usual, he began to take in his surroundings.

Neatly arranged sofa-beds lined the walls of the spacious room, each separated by blue curtains that added a clean, calming touch to the place. One wall was lined with shelves overflowing with medical supplies, though the ambrosia and nectar were securely locked away on a more protected shelf to prevent theft. In another corner, a desk bent under a mountain of papers and books, and behind it, a large window let in a gentle stream of light.

Blinking to clear the lingering drowsiness, Luke realized he knew this place—very well, in fact. He was in the Big House infirmary, back at Camp Half-Blood.

The realization made him frown.

The last thing he remembered was being in San Francisco, trying to get the apple—

*Levi.*

Suddenly, the memories came rushing back to Luke: arriving at the Garden of the Hesperides, successfully replicating one of Heracles' labors, and then, with tears welling in his eyes, Levi's final moments and the tire blowout of the mail truck.

With a jolt, he took in the fact that his memories were whole, his disbelief tinged with a hint of hysteria.

*I want you to remember me, Graecus.*

The creepy god's parting words echoed in his head, ringing like the ominous decree of an executioner.

Shaking his head briskly, which proved to be a mistake as dizziness set in almost immediately, Luke attempted to clear the deep voice from his mind with only partial success. He was still reeling from the encounter, which felt like it had happened just a few seconds ago, but with a surge of alarm, he became aware that he had no idea how much time had actually passed.

Abruptly, the demigod forced his feelings down and decided that scanning the room would be more useful than letting panic muddle his mind.

He would have time to drown in anxiety and grief later, but for now, he had more urgent priorities—like figuring out how in the burning hells he ended up here.

Daring to sit up, despite the sensation of a sack of cement weighing down his chest and making the task way more difficult, Luke's eyes darted around the infirmary for any possible leads.

The room was empty, and judging by the light streaming through the window, it was probably lunchtime.

This explained the emptiness, since a group of Apollo kids was usually stationed here throughout the day. Aside from that, there wasn't much to see: the beds were all vacant, suggesting that the demigods who had fought in the horde affair had been fully healed; the shelves were neatly organized, and the more magical medicines were securely locked away, indicating that they hadn't been used recently.

The last observation made him feel a bit better about his condition.

Unfortunately, there was nothing to clue him in on how he had ended up back at Camp, all the way from the opposite side of the country.

Frowning, Luke settled back down, already feeling tired from the minimal exertion, which only fueled the uncomfortable suspicions he'd rather ignore.

For a long moment, he lay there with his hands crossed over his stomach, staring at the ceiling and churning through all the different scenarios his mind conjured, each worse than the last, until his restlessness drove him to shift on the bed.

Belatedly, he noticed the bedside table next to him, feeling a bit stupid for not having seen it earlier.

It was cluttered with various objects, but the most notable was a vase of flowers. Some of them were withering while others were still vibrant, displaying a mix of colors: white, yellow, purple, and pink. The arrangement wasn't particularly beautiful, but it was clear the flowers hadn't been chosen at random—the bouquet's lack of charm was already enough of a hint.

As Luke's eyes fixated on the withered flowers, a sinking feeling hit him—he must have been unconscious for a while, which would explain why he felt so weak.

*What the hell did that fucking god do to me?*

Shuffling closer to the table, he examined the other items: a letter with a familiar, rushed scrawl that he chose to ignore for now, surprised by the intense surge of anger rising in his chest; some childish drawings that warmed his heart and soothed his soul; and carved birds, their distinctive style unmistakably Axel's.

Rolling back to his original position, Luke felt a bit touched to see that his friends had come by to check on him while he was incapacitated.

Almost absentmindedly, he reached into his sweatpants pocket, feeling something uncomfortable poking at his hip. Assuming it was something he'd stuck there and forgotten about, he pulled it out and furrowed his brow when he saw what it was.

To his surprise, it was a business card he was absolutely certain he hadn't placed in his pocket himself. Rolling it between his fingers, he examined it.

The card struck him as strange, being plain white like paper, with only a few words written in the middle that he didn't bother to read just yet.

Already feeling heavily suspicious—since nothing ever seemed simple in his life—Luke stared blankly at the ceiling for a moment, took a deep breath, and then sighed before bringing the card back up to his eyes.

*Duo beneficia, Graecus. Te iterum convenire cum maior fueris exspecto.*

Of course, it had to be *him*. Honestly, Luke didn't even know what he was expecting.

He narrowed his eyes as he tried to make sense of the message, silently cursing the god for not making it easier and writing it in English, especially since he had seemed to speak it well enough.

After a moment of frustration, Luke remembered he spoke Portuguese, which might help him with Latin.

Ignoring the pang of embarrassment, he focused on the words.

'Duo' resembled 'dois,' which meant two, and 'beneficia' was quite similar to 'benefício.' So, it read as 'two benefits.'

No, wait—'two favors.'

*Two favors for what, you cursed god?* Luke wondered furiously, scowling at nothing.

As he calmed down, he began to rationalize that one favor was likely for not taking his memory, though he still felt it was unfair. The deity had made that choice on his own, not because the demigod had asked for it. Besides, the second favor remained a mystery and

could very well be something the god had invented—Luke didn't find it wise to doubt that man's audacity.

Sighing despairingly, he realized there was nothing more he could do about it and turned his attention back to his task. However, even as he squinted and racked his brain for a translation, the rest of the phrase remained somewhat unclear to him.

So far, it read as 'two favors, Greek. You *something something*, I expect older *something*,' since he couldn't decipher the rest. To be honest, the order might not even be correct either, but that was all he had for now.

*Fucking gods and their games.*

In a sudden burst of fury, he hurled the card with all his force, watching it slam against the wall before bouncing and landing on the far side of the room.

For a moment, he stared blankly at nothing in particular, wondering why his life had to be this messed up.

Why would a Roman god go through all this trouble to toy with him when he could have simply erased the demigod's memories and gone on with his day as if he had never crossed paths with two Greeks? It would have been the safest option—why risk a war between their people? Was the deity that certain Luke would keep his mouth shut, that he wouldn't tell anyone?

He didn't know. He didn't even know who the man was, let alone his reasons.

Maybe it really would have been better if the god had just wiped Luke's memory, consequences be damned. Then he wouldn't be feeling this way—so worried and scared about how things could become even more problematic, about the danger he might be in.

Luke would have allowed himself to be sad, to grieve Levi, and to feel a small, guilty hint of happiness that, despite facing the same quest as Book Luke, he had managed to alter *something* about his fate.

But he couldn't afford to relax—not with everything so uncertain.

Abruptly, a strange sensation from within his chest jolted him out of his misery.

Shuddering, he lifted a hand to his chest and concentrated, feeling a faint, foreign energy nestled close to his heart. To his horror, it seemed almost alive, pulsing as if acknowledging Luke's attention. It felt slightly familiar—the same calculating edge, now softened and more gentle.

It was that god's aura.

And it was inside him.

Trembling, Luke let his hand fall to his side, his gaze unfocused as his breaths grew shallow and quick. He felt a wave of dizziness wash over him as he wondered how long that thing

had been there and what its purpose was.

Clasping his hands tightly and bringing them to his mouth, Luke desperately tried to convince himself he was safe within Camp Half-Blood.

No Romans could enter; doing so would be a declaration of war.

Breathing deeply and slowly, he gripped his shirt, feeling its rough, worn texture from the punishment it had endured over the past few days and, frankly, from months of use. He wore it everywhere—it was loose, oversized, and comfortable.

Most importantly, it grounded him, helping him calm down and think more rationally again.

First of all, Luke needed to hide the business card. It was in Latin, and if anyone—*especially* Mr. D—found it, it could open a can of worms he wouldn't be able to explain.

*No one* could know about it.

Standing up on wobbly legs, Luke made his way over to where he had thrown the card. He crouched down with difficulty, his stiff joints almost causing him to lose balance, and shoved it back into his pocket. Task completed, he staggered back to his bed and collapsed onto it, his legs trembling as he wheezed tiredly.

Lying there, catching his breath, Luke admitted to himself that he truly had no idea how to handle all of this. But he was quite certain he'd figure something out along the way.

His top priority was to avoid having his memory wiped for real or, even worse, sparking a conflict because a Roman god thought he was superior to the others and could act with no consequence.

Easy. He just had to keep his mouth shut. He was an expert on that.

Feeling a bit less nervous, he reminded himself that he wouldn't be leaving Camp Half-Blood anytime soon, so avoiding the god would be fairly simple as well.

Now, he just needed to figure out who that man was and, easier said than done, find a way to remove the thing from his chest without letting anyone know. On top of that, he still had to get his counselor position back.

That reminded him: where was the golden apple?

Before he could spiral into anxiety again, he heard familiar voices and footsteps echoing down the corridors, heading toward the infirmary.

Soon enough, Katherine and Lee burst into the room, bickering as they came. They moved with the ease of people who'd been in the infirmary many times before, and it took them a moment to notice Luke was awake, so distracted were they in their argument. When they saw he was awake, their expressions shifted from surprise to relief, then to something that looked almost like tears.

He barely had a moment to prepare himself before Lee threw himself at him, hugging him so tightly that the blonde could feel his ribs cracking.

Feeling magnanimous—though he admitted it was partly due to remorse for disappearing without notice—he allowed Lee to hug him for a few seconds. When he got tired of it, Luke lightly tapped the other boy's back: first once, then twice, and finally repeatedly and with increasing urgency when the younger demigod didn't release him.

"I was so worried." The golden-haired boy sniffled, stepping back as he rubbed his puffy, red eyes.

"I didn't think we would have to leave so suddenly." Luke tried to explain himself. He might have been attempting to offer some comfort to the crying kid, or maybe he was trying to clear his own guilty conscience with a valid excuse.

But was it really an excuse if it was the truth?

However, the reaction to his words wasn't what he had expected.

Instead of getting more emotional or even upset, Lee paused, exchanged a glance with Katherine, and furrowed his brows in a way that suggested he was uncomfortable, perhaps even uncertain.

Before Luke could investigate, Kat took the lead, walking closer and settling on the sofa-bed beside him. She grasped one of his hands between her own, opened her mouth, then closed it again before sighing and deciding to speak at last.

"Luke, what do you remember after we got the apple?"

Narrowing his eyes at his friend's careful demeanor, the blonde pondered how to answer the question without giving himself away.

No matter how much his heart longed for it, believing she remembered the same events as he did was mere wishful thinking.

"Levi. I remember Levi." He answered after a moment of silence, his voice cracking as if the words forced him to relive the moment of his friend's death. "When will his funeral happen?"

Inside his mind, Levi and Aubrey merged, their blood and flesh melting together into a single, lifeless corpse. At times, the face was his friend's, at others, his sister's, but the eyes were always glassy, dead, and looking straight at him.

Closing her eyes as if in pain, Kat took a deep, shaky breath. When she reopened them, they were shiny with unshed tears and gazed at him so sadly that Luke felt a coldness grip his spine with an unrelenting hold.

"Luke…" She faltered, then steeled herself and continued, "You've been unconscious for a long time."

“I already figured that out.” He snapped, making her flinch. Instantly, the blonde felt bad, rubbing his face with his hands before making an effort to lighten his tone. “Look, I’m an overthinker, you know that. I had a fit before you arrived because I saw the wilted flowers, but now I’m as good as I can be. So, please, just…tell me.”

Kat stared at him for a long moment. Squeezing his hand as comfortingly as she could, she finally confessed, “We had his funeral two weeks ago, right after we arrived at Camp.”

The declaration echoed in his ears like a shout, loud and earth-shattering.

Lowering his gaze to their joined hands, he felt hollow as he stared at the stark contrast between their skin tones—dark brown with a cool undertone against his fair, slightly rosy complexion—desperately trying to distract himself even as the words kept ringing inside his head.

Two weeks.

*Two weeks since they had been in San Francisco. Two weeks since Levi had been alive and whole. Two weeks since Luke had been awake.*

Lee’s hesitant voice caught the blonde’s attention, the movement feeling oddly sluggish, like it was happening underwater. The younger boy’s tone grew increasingly distressed as he wailed, “W-we thought we had lost you too. There was nothing wrong with you, but you wouldn’t wake up!”

“Nothing wrong with me?” He asked, blinking slowly to clear the haze that had settled over him.

Tightening her grip on his hands, grounding him—or perhaps herself—Katherine explained, “You had a flare-up from the concussion that day. I don’t know if you remember—I wouldn’t be surprised if you don’t—but after Levi’s…death, when we were heading home, you sat beside me and fell asleep. But then you didn’t wake up. The fight probably messed with your head; the acrobatics you did, how you were thrown to the ground by that nymph. I treated you then, but you didn’t wake. When we arrived, I tried again with the Cabin Seven campers, and you remained unconscious. You were healthy, the concussion had healed, but even so—” She paused, then shuffled closer and gently hugged him, whispering in his ear, “I felt so useless, so scared I was going to lose you too.”

Not knowing what to say, Luke remained silent but returned the hug, offering comfort to her as much as to himself.

It was obvious that the deity had tampered with Kat’s memories—she didn’t recall the tire blowout or the events that followed and even seemed to believe his condition was merely a side effect of his head injury, despite her own confirmation that he was physically fine.

A sense of suspicion surged within him, whispering in his ear that whatever had caused him to sleep for so long was certainly connected to the god who had ambushed them, likely as a way to make the narrative more convincing.

Almost as if summoned by that thought, the foreign energy in his chest pulsed with a pleasant warmth, feeling almost…as if it were reacting to his mood.

Ignoring it as best as he could and repressing a shudder, Luke leaned back and reassured, "I'm here and awake." Smirking slightly, he added, eager to lighten the mood and show that he was feeling better, "And I don't plan on taking another nap anytime soon. I'd rather not be known as a sloth, you know?"

Katherine huffed, giving him a decidedly unimpressed look. Though she seemed relieved to see he was acting like himself, she still chided him, "Don't joke about this; we were all very worried. Mr. D—" She cut herself off, then continued with a serious frown, "A lot happened while you were sleeping."

"I'm sure." Luke remarked. He was certain that what they had achieved was a pretty big deal—so much so that it probably stirred chaos within Camp when they got back. Then there was also the issue of leaving without Dionysus' permission and his father's side of the bargain to consider. However, while those matters were undoubtedly very important, he could focus on only one thing. "But—was Levi honored as he should have been?"

"Yes." Kat replied softly, her eyes sad but proud. "He was laid to rest as a hero, with the symbols of his mother placed over him. He was lauded, and all of Camp Half-Blood was present, even Mr. D."

Exhaling a little, the blonde whispered, "I'm glad."

It was a small consolation, but Luke knew Levi had always wanted to be claimed, like the other demigods who resided as guests under Cabin Eleven's roof.

While staying unclaimed often led to desperation or bitterness, his friend had never lost hope. Despite having no father since his own had died when he was just a child, and a mother who had never openly acknowledged him, Levi had stayed strong.

At least now, his hope—his wish for a family—had been fulfilled.

*A bit too late,* Luke thought harshly.

"Katherine was claimed too." Lee chimed in, breaking the silence as he shifted the conversation to a lighter topic. With a smug look, he glanced sideways at the older woman and announced, "I'm her grand-uncle, you know?"

"Really?" Luke exclaimed, turning to look at Kat.

She seemed completely neutral about it, neither happy nor bitter about the years of waiting she had endured, just indifferent.

"I already knew who my mother was; the claiming was completely unnecessary." Kat said, rolling her eyes at Lee's behavior.

Well, given her interest in mythology, it was no surprise that Katherine had figured it out. It was also completely in character for her to keep it to herself—the woman was the epitome of

a low-profile person.

“Who is it?”

“Hygeia, the goddess of good health.” She answered as if it were obvious, and in hindsight, it really was.

Her complete and utter disgust for anything dirty, her ability to alleviate pain—like her grandmother, who was the goddess of the soothing of pain—and her healing powers, which were quite weak compared to those of her relatives from Cabin Seven.

It really was quite self-evident.

“It makes a lot of sense.” He mused, then smiled. “I’m really happy for you, Kat.”

She snorted but gave his hand a pat in acknowledgment of his words.

“Me too.” Lee interjected with a playful tone. “I’m really proud to have such an impressive niece.”

Rolling her eyes, Kat leaned toward the bedside table, opened the drawer, and grabbed a spray bottle. With a quick, snake-like motion, she began spraying water at Lee.

“Bad uncle.” She said flatly, watching the golden-haired boy shriek and try to dodge the spray. “Bad.”

Luke watched with a growing grin, unable to hold back his laughter as Lee dashed around the room. The sound of his amusement made the younger demigod halt mid-escape and even caused Kat to pause her attacks.

“How did you get claimed?” He finally managed to ask, still giggling a bit.

“We were taking care of you, Kat and I.” Lee hurried to explain, beating the woman to it. “It was an ordinary day, nothing unusual, when suddenly a light appeared and a symbol—a chalice with a snake wrapped around it—showed up above her head.” He furrowed his brows, adding with a pout, “She didn’t even look all that surprised by it.”

“You screamed enough for both of us.” Kat retorted dryly, her expression revealing just how done she was with the conversation. Ignoring Lee’s offended reaction, she decided that Luke was calm enough to handle more serious matters and continued, “And we have more important things to discuss than this.”

“True.” Luke conceded, then asked, voicing his main concern, “What happened to the apple?”

“I sent it to the Messenger not long after we arrived. Chiron had some boxes from Hermes Express, so it was delivered to your father right away.”

Glancing sideways at the letter, Luke wondered if the fact that the apple was in his father’s hands meant that Hermes had already upheld his part of the deal.

She hesitated for a bit before stating, “While you were out of commission, there was an… uproar, if I can put it that way.”

“Uproar?” He repeated, puzzled.

“When you all left, Camp fell into chaos. It was just one day, but Mr. D was furious, and Chiron was so stressed that it ended up affecting everyone. Then Mr. D disappeared, and when he returned, he was even angrier, which sparked rumors and caused a lot of fear. When you finally came back, we were all relieved until we realized Levi was dead and you weren’t waking up.” Lee explained, nervously fidgeting with his hands. His expression turned frightened as he whispered, “I’ll never forget Mr. D’s face when he saw you two.”

*That* was not good news.

He had avoided thinking about that detail, distracting himself with other problems whenever it crossed his mind. But he was pretty sure he was screwed.

There was no doubt—Luke should prepare to kiss his freedom goodbye.

“And that’s not the worst of it.” Kat interrupted, a hint of spite slipping through her tone. “The longer you stayed in a coma, the more tense things became at Camp. We were on the brink of a civil war. To give you an idea of the scale, Cabin Five and Cabin Six even managed to find common ground—they were both displeased with Ed as the acting counselor.”

“You need to explain how it all got so bad in the first place, Kat.” Lee interjected, causing the older demigod to roll her eyes but gesture for him to continue. “To begin with, Mr. D banned all quests for the foreseeable future. Obviously, there was some protest, but no one dared push too hard, and the atmosphere was so charged that it felt like something was bound to give. Then your brother made a mistake—”

“One of the many he’s made in his life.” Kat cut in.

Raising his eyebrows at her, clearly exasperated by her second interruption, Lee grumbled, “Yeah, yeah. He made one more mistake in a sea of them, but this one was the catalyst.” Turning to face Luke, he asked, “Do you remember that newbie? The one you like to speak to?”

“Inês, you mean?”

Of course Luke remembered her; she was the only other person at Camp who spoke Portuguese.

However, when he first tried to speak with her, he almost had an existential crisis because he didn’t understand her at all. Her accent made it incredibly difficult—she hissed more than a pressure cooker.

But it all clicked when he learned she was from Portugal.

“Yeah, In- In- Inez—that one.” Lee stammered, trying to get the pronunciation right but failing quite badly. “You know how she doesn’t speak English very well yet, right?”

Luke simply nodded. In fact, he knew the situation very well, since he had been the one helping her with her English whenever he could.

“Well, Edward isn’t fond of having the unclaimed around, right? Everyone knows that.” Lee said. He continued, gesturing with both his hands for emphasis. “The thing is, he started picking on her—easy target, you know? She doesn’t speak the language well, she’s new, and aside from you, she doesn’t have many friends. So, she kind of became the example to keep the unclaimed in line, especially since they weren’t exactly happy with Edward in charge. It was really obvious, even to us—demigods from the other cabins.”

“Yeah, he made everyone sleep on the ground. There were spare beds, but he said those were reserved for the children of the patron god. Inez didn’t understand, and when she tried to get a bed, he berated her in front of everyone, making her cry.” Kat added, providing her firsthand perspective when it became clear Lee didn’t know the exact details.

Poor Inês must have felt awful; she was such a sensitive and empathetic kid.

“Edward is only dividing your cabin even more. For example, during mealtimes, the Messenger’s kids eat first—to have more space, I would guess—while the unclaimed have to wait until they’re finished. Because of this, they end up doing everything later—the offerings, the activities, and so on.” Lee explained, furrowing his brows as he recalled the past few days. “It was honestly very uncomfortable to witness how he was treating the others.”

“How the hell did Chiron even allow this?” Luke asked, incredulous that things had sunk to such a new low.

“Well, the meal thing is straightforward.” Kat clarified, resting her chin on her hands. “We stay at the cabin for a while and then head to the Dining Pavilion later. So, Chiron probably didn’t even notice. He’s been very busy these past few days, trying to figure out your health issues and dealing with Mr. D.”

“Okay, fine. Things got bad, but how did Cabins Five and Six get involved? This shouldn’t concern them.” Luke questioned, massaging his temples in frustration as he tried to make sense of the escalation his brother had caused.

Cackling with a dark, childlike glee, Katherine declared, “It backfired. It backfired *badly*.”

“Inez ended up being claimed. Guess by who?” Lee grinned, leaning forward with his amber eyes gleaming like twin suns, brimming with eagerness.

Luke narrowed his eyes in thought. The kid was soft and sensitive, so he doubted she was from Ares. She also lacked the usual arrogant pompousness of Athena's children—even little Annabeth.

If neither was the cause, then only one other option remained to explain that level of mayhem.

“The Foam-Born?”

“Yeah, the claiming was pretty flashy and very public.” Lee answered. He grinned and added with a laugh, “You should have seen Edward’s face—his eyes nearly bulged out of his head!”

“And with good reason. Those hyenas are vicious.” Luke muttered with a shudder.

He remembered all the times those persistent little pests had ambushed him with fluttering eyelashes and excessive touching, followed by their fury when he inevitably rebuffed their attempts.

Really, they took after their mother far too much.

“So, Cabin Ten took offense at how our Eleven hellhole had treated their newest sister and made their grievances known—in their signature brand of passive-aggressiveness, the kind that makes life miserable.” Katherine continued, her voice dripping with satisfaction. “Edward clearly felt the pressure because he dared to retaliate, which meant…”

“Cabin Five got involved.” Luke concluded.

Looking less enthusiastic about this part of the gossip, Lee nodded and recounted, “Peter demanded that Edward step down and reinstate you as counselor. He argued that you’d proven yourself worthy by completing one of Hercules' labors and, and I quote, were better than some sniveling, honorless coward who only achieved anything noteworthy when it was taken by those better than himself.”

“Now, here’s where it gets interesting.” Kat said, bringing her hands together with a dramatic flourish. “Ryan, of all people, threw his support behind Peter’s statement, saying he’d prefer dealing with a tricky fae who actually knew how to handle people—in this case, you—over a tactless thief.”

If Luke knew his brother as well as he thought he did after four years living together, he’d wager that Ed wouldn’t care much about outsiders' opinions on things that didn’t concern them.

What would *really* infuriate him was the audacity of them thinking they had the right to interfere.

“Then a fight broke out because my brother couldn’t stand the other cabins sticking their noses into Cabin Eleven’s business. Am I right?” The blonde sighed.

“Absolutely. It turned into a full-blown brawl across the entire Camp. Even those who had nothing to do with it started throwing punches left and right. Cabin Ten’s counselor, that demon Charlie, used charmspeak on Ed to give Peter the chance to land a bunch of hits. It was honestly pretty satisfying.” Kat said, a smile spreading across her face as she recalled the chaos.

*Man, I can’t believe I missed out on this circus show.*

Luke shook his head, speechless, trying to wrap his mind around the chaos that had erupted while he was unconscious.

With a sudden jolt, he realized something that didn't quite add up.

"But why were they trying to reinstate me while I was unconscious? Didn't you say no one knew what was wrong with me?"

"Well, people thought you'd wake up eventually, and we weren't exactly broadcasting how clueless we were about your condition." Lee admitted, rubbing the side of his neck.

To avoid creating even more panic, Luke would have guessed.

It was a smart move; if things at Camp were as bad as they'd described, keeping his condition under wraps was probably the best option.

"It was all very hush-hush—only Chiron and Mr. D knew. And, you know…" Kat continued, straightening up and looking more uneasy. She pressed her lips together, fidgeted with her hands, and cast a wary glance at the table, particularly the letter.

"My father."

"Yes." She confirmed. Clearing her throat, as if trying to dispel her discomfort, she clarified, "Lord Messenger came here personally and even stopped the brawl himself. It was…very intimidating."

Hermes came to Camp and terrorized everyone into submission? Did Mr. D actually allow that?

Still, considering his father's tendency to do whatever he wanted, it was hard to say for sure.

"When everyone finally quieted down, he told Edward he was deeply disappointed and that he was no longer the counselor. He handed the position over to you, saying that replicating one of Heracles' labors was far more impressive than anything Edward had ever done." Kat continued seriously, her voice carrying a trace of sympathy, even though it was clear she believed the other demigod had earned it.

"And when did that happen?" He asked after a moment of silence, unsure how to feel about it.

On one hand, Luke was relieved that his father had kept his promise and reinstated him as counselor. On the other hand, Edward was still his brother, and hearing about the public humiliation he suffered from their father—when earning their godly parent's acknowledgment was every demigod's dream—made the blonde think Hermes had been excessively harsh.

"Four days ago." She replied. "He seemed in a hurry, like his mind wasn't fully into it. Anyway, he handed me that letter." Katherine gestured to the unopened paper beside his bed. "And told me to make sure you got it before leaving."

Grimacing, Luke glanced at the letter lying innocently on the table.

He knew all too well that he owed his father a favor, and the time to collect had arrived.

But that had nothing to do with his friends, and sharing it would only add to their worry. Thus, he decided to keep it to himself.

A heavy silence settled over the room until Lee, clearly fretting, approached Luke and started a thorough examination, checking how he was holding up after being unconscious for so long.

Soon after, Katherine joined in, performing her own checkup.

The good news was that he was fine, considering he had been in a coma for two weeks. His head was intact with no injuries, and he was doing better than a typical mortal would—one of the perks of being half-god, he supposed.

However, it seemed their brief moment of peace was over when the door slammed open, startling all three of them.

Turning his head toward the noise, Luke blanched and instinctively curled into himself, trying to make himself smaller.

Even the energy inside him seemed to shrink away, becoming even fainter as it burrowed deeper and stilled, as if trying to hide. Moreover, its nature shifted subtly, becoming more furtive and nearly undetectable.

Standing in the doorway with an unfriendly, serious expression was Mr. D.

“You two.” He intoned, his voice leaving no room for argument, not even bothering to face them as he fixed his gaze on Luke. “Out.”

They hesitated for a moment, exchanging uncertain glances with their bedridden friend.

However, a sharp, demanding cough from Mr. D jolted them into action. Both squeezed Luke’s hands briefly before quickly retreating from the room, eager to avoid staying in the god’s presence longer than necessary and clearly wary of the consequences of disobedience.

Before long, it was just Luke and Mr. D left in the room.

The silence was so thick that even the smallest noise would have seemed deafening.

As the uncomfortable quiet stretched on, Luke squirmed, glancing at the director’s face but quickly averting his eyes, unable to hold the gaze.

When Mr. D started to march over, the blonde scrambled to speak, stammering, “I can explain—”

He was interrupted as the god pulled him into a tight, fierce hug.

“Don’t you ever pull a stunt like this again, you stupid, *stupid* boy.” Mr. D whispered, his voice carrying a trace of pain.

For a moment that felt like an eternity, Luke sat there, speechless and bewildered. Then, slowly, he raised his arms and awkwardly returned the hug, offering hesitant but reassuring pats on the god’s back.

In the quiet that followed, Dionysus leaned back and cleared his throat, a hint of discomfort showing through. He summoned an armchair that Luke recognized from their usual meeting room and settled into it, positioning himself directly in front of the demigod.

They locked eyes, each waiting for the other to speak first.

After a long pause, Mr. D sighed deeply, his weariness evident on his face, which now looked significantly older. His appearance seemed to shift, mirroring the man’s mood.

“Was it worth it?” He finally asked.

“No.” Luke whispered, his suppressed pain breaking through the walls he had built around himself with that simple, pointed question, leaving him raw and vulnerable. His lips trembled as if fighting to hold back a flood, and he choked out, “It really wasn’t. Levi—"

He couldn’t hold back the subsequent broken sobs.

As Luke wailed, Mr. D leaned forward, pulling the demigod into another gentle hug and shushing him soothingly. He allowed the blonde to mourn—the lost time, the friend who had seemed to pass away just hours ago but was already burned and sent to the Underworld, perhaps even to Elysium.

Luke dearly, desperately hoped that Levi was there with Aubrey.

The deity’s aura wrapped around them like a protective, soothing blanket, striving to ease the demigod's emotional pain, though it too seemed to quiver with distress.

When he finally calmed down, his nose stuffed and his eyes puffy, Luke felt a bit better.

“Don’t be a hero, Luke.” Mr. D urged, his tone urgent as he gripped the demigod’s shoulders. “Heroes may earn glory, gain the favor of the gods, and make their parents proud, but it’s always at their own expense. It’s the classic Greek tragedy, and I’ve seen it too many times.”

“I wanted—I wanted to be the counselor, to prevent what ended up happening.” Luke confessed sadly, his brow furrowing.

“You could have come to me.” The god snapped sharply. “You didn’t need to risk your life on a foolish quest just so your father could boast about one of his children successfully getting a golden apple.”

Flinching back, Luke felt a painful clench in his heart. Even though he didn’t like his father, hearing his sacrifice treated so casually hurt deeply.

Observing his reaction, Mr. D rubbed his face before sighing and speaking with some reluctance, “I didn’t mean that.” He added, as if forced to bite into a sour lemon, “Your father is proud of you and genuinely worried. He tried to help in the only way he knew, even if it wasn’t the best alternative.”

Warily, the blonde stared at Dionysus, trying to gauge the truth of his statement.

“He could have sent me on another quest.” He finally uttered, his words laced with resentment.

Why this particular quest? Why one of Heracles’ labors?

“He could.” The god agreed, his expression darkening slightly. “Hermes always has his reasons, no matter how eccentric they may be, and he never acts without them. Right now, for some unknown motive, he’s bragging to anyone who will listen about how his little Luke has accomplished what Heracles once did. It’s drawing a lot of attention to you.” Muttering darkly under his breath, he added, barely audible, “And making my life more difficult.”

“Why? Why is he doing that?”

It didn’t make sense to Luke.

His father had clearly hated Mr. D using his own magic on his son, so why would he draw the attention of other gods to the demigod when he was so territorial?

With a shudder, he wondered what Hermes would do if he discovered the trace of the foreign god’s aura residing inside his chest. That was a big if, though, since this thing seemed exceptionally good at hiding; even the director hadn’t noticed it, despite having laid his own aura over him earlier.

Studying him for a long moment, Mr. D casually averted his gaze to his nails and retorted, “Trying to understand him is a task doomed to failure. Your father is a trickster god, Lucy; much of what he does doesn’t make sense.”

Luke narrowed his eyes, feeling oddly suspicious of the answer despite completely agreeing with what was voiced.

Yet, he couldn’t shake the feeling that something was being left unsaid.

“Besides, he won’t be bothering you anytime soon.” Dionysus declared, waving his hand dismissively.

Wouldn’t that be a dream?

“Are you sure? He seems to show up here whenever he wants…” Luke muttered skeptically.

Snorting with amusement, Mr. D appeared more relaxed and vindicated as he said, “He’s occupied with his…diplomatic duties, if you will.”

“I see.”

The demigod's mind raced, trying to make sense of what that could possibly mean. Without enough information, however, he couldn't even begin to guess.

"In any case." Mr. D declared suddenly, snapping his fingers to summon a Diet Coke and abruptly changing the subject. "Quests are now banned, Lucy, so don't get any ideas. Also, you're grounded indefinitely for disobeying me."

Luke couldn't control his reaction at the mention of the forbidden word.

"Don't pout." The god remarked with a snort. Then, growing serious again, he hesitated for a split second before announcing, "I have some news—both good and bad."

That sounded weirdly ominous.

Fidgeting with his hands, Luke stared at Mr. D, who was patiently waiting for him to decide, and asked, "Could you start with the bad news, please?"

Maybe hearing the good news last would lift his spirits, or at least provide some comfort. After a day full of bad news, one more disappointment wouldn't add much more to his already weary heart—or so he liked to think.

"We've lost your sister's trail." Dionysus complied solemnly. "We had a lead on her movements at first, but recently, it's as if she's vanished completely."

Closing his eyes, Luke couldn't say he was particularly surprised by that revelation.

Abigail's ability to shadow travel meant she could move across great distances with ease and reach any place she desired, as long as she had the energy for it.

He could only hope she was still alive and safe, wherever she might be. At the same time, knowing her independent nature, he was fairly certain she was okay.

"I—" He cut himself off, then managed to say, "Thanks for trying, sir, but I guess she chose her own path."

"Nephew—" Mr. D began, then abruptly stopped. His expression shifted to one of hesitation for a brief moment before he masked it with his usual nonchalance.

An awkward silence hung between them.

Coughing a little, Luke glanced at the god with a hint of surprise. Despite the time they had spent together, he hadn't quite expected this.

He should have, though. He *really* should have.

Nervously, he wet his lips and asked tentatively, "And what's the good news…uncle?"

Smiling faintly, with a hint of relief peeking through, though the expression was expertly hidden behind his drink, Dionysus took one last sip before waving his hand to make the Diet

Coke disappear. He then leaned forward, clasped his hands together, and spoke as carefully as he could.

“We found your grandmother, Luke.”

Chapter End Notes

Luke waking up at Camp after being knocked out for two weeks, thinking, “Damn, something’s not right.” As for the aura, it’s very faint—just a trace, really. The Roman god is creepy, but he’s not stupid.

There’s a lot of dialogue revealing what happened while Luke was out. Even though Luke is the protagonist, the world doesn’t stop; many things occurred in his absence. Ed is clearly favoring his siblings, focusing on his family rather than the guests. As for Inês’ situation, Aphrodite is a terrifying goddess who doesn’t tolerate disrespect, so her children are probably just as vicious. Naturally, Ares’ kids have some sort of alliance with them, and Athena’s children are seizing the opportunity to pounce. So, chaos ensues, with Hermes appearing, scaring everyone, humiliating his son, and then leaving without any explanations.

Then there’s Mr. D and Luke bonding. Dionysus was really mad but more concerned than anything else, with a few hints thrown around about what’s happening on the god’s side. Finally, there’s the uncle-nephew acknowledgment, which was a long time coming.

Hermes right now: “I was obsessed; I spent 80% of my time talking about Luke, and during the other 20%, I hoped someone would mention him so I could talk about him a little more.”

Anyway, thanks for reading! ❤️❤️❤️

# Chapter 25: Teenhood - Scapegoat

Chapter Summary

Luke finds out that Ed is not the only culprit

Chapter Notes

Releasing the chapter a bit early…lol

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Come on, Annabeth." Luke sighed, his exasperation evident. "I've already apologized and promised it won't happen again."

*Besides, it's not like I can leave anyway,* he thought, wisely keeping that tidbit to himself to avoid provoking the girl any further.

Luke was grounded. Again.

This time, however, he had no magic to prevent him from leaving the Camp's barriers.

Perhaps Mr. D didn't want to risk him seeking out his father again, or maybe there was another reason. Whatever the case, Luke had some freedom—minimal, but still better than being little more than a bird in a cage.

"I don't want your apologies or your excuses!" The girl cried out, her cheeks puffed and her glare fixed on the older demigod.

With a pout, she turned her head away from him, pointedly ignoring his presence as she stomped off with no clear destination in mind.

Exhaling deeply, Luke followed her.

He knew she would eventually come around; he just hoped it would be sooner rather than later.

She had been avoiding him throughout his rehabilitation, which was why he had sought her out in the first place. He figured, though his reasoning was flawed, that she had had enough time to work through her anger. However, Annabeth had lost someone very dear to her just a short while ago—barely a month had passed since Thalia's death—and it was clear she was struggling with the possibility of losing someone else.

And wasn't it strange to realize how much had happened in those short few weeks?

Silently, the blonde walked behind the girl, easily keeping pace with her even as she hurried to shake him off. Luke was, after all, the fastest demigod in Camp; a little seven-year-old had no chance of outpacing him.

Pausing abruptly, Annabeth turned around, her face twisted into a scowl.

"Don't follow me!"

"I'm not following you; we're just heading in the same direction." Luke replied with an innocent expression.

With a suspicious huff, she cast one last glare in his direction, deliberately avoiding eye contact, and resumed her aimless march. She passed the pegasus stables, where some campers were in the middle of a racing competition, the archery range, and eventually reached the amphitheater.

It was an enormous space, as it needed to be to accommodate all the Camp's demigods during the campfire songs after dinner. Built in the grandiose Greek style, it was an open-air venue with tiered levels of white stone seats arranged in a semi-circle around the central area where the campfire, and occasionally performances and sports, took place.

Luke was grateful for it; everyone needed a distraction now and then, even if it meant enduring some second-hand embarrassment from the, admittedly, subpar acts.

And, more importantly, it was currently deserted, which was likely why the younger demigod had led him here.

There, Annabeth stopped once again and turned to face him. This time, her anger was tinged with distress, and the blonde understood they were finally getting somewhere.

"You know I didn't mean to make you worry, Annabeth." Luke said softly.

"You left." She whispered, her voice trembling. She then repeated more forcefully, "You left without telling anyone. And when you came back, you still weren't really here."

"I had no choice. My father—" Luke stopped abruptly, grimacing as it brought his thoughts straight to the letter he had been avoiding.

He was reluctant to open it and discover what new, unfair request the god might have made, or what favor he wanted in return. He knew he had to do it soon; he had already procrastinated for a few days—more than enough time.

"You're just using Her—" The older demigod quickly covered the incensed girl's mouth, preventing her from uttering the name and potentially drawing the god's attention.

That was the last thing he wanted, and he had a feeling the entire Camp would agree with him.

“The Messenger.” Luke said pointedly, removing his hand when Annabeth slowly nodded. “Gave me that quest. I thought I’d have time to prepare and say goodbye, but he didn’t give us that chance. We were forced to leave right away.”

“Why? You could have refused.” The girl argued.

How naïve.

Sometimes Luke forgot how young Annabeth was and how new she was to all of this. But then moments like these hit him hard, making him remember that, despite her intelligence and maturity, she was still very much a child.

“You don’t refuse the gods, Annabeth. They’re not like us.”

With a confused frown, she protested in a soft, uncertain voice, “But they’re our parents.”

“They are.” He agreed, trying to ignore the nagging thought that his father was barely more than a sperm donor—if that, considering gods didn’t even have DNA. “But we’re just mortals, while they’re not. We see things differently—*very* differently.”

Uncle D—and wasn’t it odd to think of that grumpy, reluctantly sober god as family—was a prime example.

Yet, he had once been a demigod himself, and that experience hadn’t faded. Despite his disdain for heroes and his resentment toward that particular son of Poseidon for what he’d done with his wife, he understood them in a way no other god did, and it was evident.

“Your father is very scary.” Annabeth confessed, her anger softening as she began to grasp what he was saying. She’d likely witnessed Hermes on that tumultuous day when he had decided traumatizing children was on his agenda. Looking at him solemnly, she declared, “I understand why you left now, and I forgive you for it.”

Well, it wasn’t exactly the conclusion he’d hoped she’d reach, but it was good enough for now.

Snorting, Luke ruffled her hair and replied with amusement, “Thank you, little lady. I’m forever grateful for your magnanimity toward a poor peasant like me.”

With a faint blush spreading across her face, Annabeth let him pat her head for a moment longer before pushing his hand away.

“You’re not a peasant.” She announced seriously, trying to hide the red on her cheeks and adopt a more dignified expression—which was quite cute. “Now that you’re the counselor again, you’re like a king.” She paused, furrowing her brows as she thought it over, and then added, “Actually, a prince. A fairy prince. Mr. D would be the king.”

Smiling, Luke asked, holding back a chuckle at her earnestness, “A fairy? Me?”

“Yes. My brother called you a tricky fairy.” She nodded resolutely as if that explanation made perfect sense.

She must have meant ‘fae’ rather than ‘fairy,’ but her mix-up was honestly very endearing, especially since she was so keen on appearing as grown-up as possible.

“Ryan calling me a fairy? That’s unexpected—almost a compliment from him.” Luke joked, choosing not to correct her on the proper term.

Soon, she would outgrow those little, childish mistakes—likely sooner than expected. It was a shame, really.

“Big brother doesn’t hate you.” Annabeth announced, like it were some sort of significant achievement, reaching out to take his hand when he offered it.

As Luke led her back to her cabin, mulling over how to address that statement—he certainly didn’t see a pompous little jerk not hating him as a reason to feel flattered—he barely had time to leave the amphitheater before the man in question appeared.

Speak of the devil, and he shall appear, indeed.

“Castellan.” Ryan greeted, though his attention quickly shifted to his sister, and he waved her over with an exasperated expression.

“Kendrick.” Luke replied, pausing briefly to observe the siblings. He then shook his head and added, “I’ll be going now.”

“Wait.” The son of Athena, looking slightly uncomfortable, continued as the younger demigod paused to listen. “I wanted to offer my condolences. Levi was a hero, and his loss affected us all.”

Luke studied the older demigod for a moment before sighing and replying curtly, “Yes, he was.”

No matter what the blonde thought about his friend's fate, or what he believed was deserved by the unclaimed and minor gods’ children, he could agree on one point—Levi was a hero. Even so, he would have preferred that his friend had not died at all or, at the very least, had been acknowledged before tragedy struck.

Levi deserved better. They all did. Neither claimed nor unclaimed should have to prove their worth to earn respect from those who should love and care for them.

They hadn't chosen to exist, but they did, and they suffered every day because of it.

“And—and I’m glad to see you’ve recovered.” Ryan continued, pausing and stammering as he spoke. He was also clearly uncertain about how to handle the situation, especially after Luke’s curt answer.

“Thank you for your concern.” Luke replied, feeling a bit unsettled by how out of character the other man was acting.

The younger demigod knew that Ryan wasn’t usually inclined toward softness, so this clumsy attempt at kindness felt quite strange to say the least.

Where was the arrogant man he was used to?

“See?” Annabeth chimed in, her voice filled with self-satisfaction as she tilted her chin up and looked at Luke with a smug expression. “Big brother likes you.”

“‘Like’ is a strong word, Annabeth.” Ryan immediately countered. Then, casting an awkward glance at Luke, he cleared his throat and added, “No offense intended, of course.”

Waving one hand dismissively, Luke replied, “It’s fine. I don’t particularly like you either.”

“But you called him a fairy!” She protested, frowning at her brother with visible annoyance.

“A fae, Annie.” Ryan sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose in frustration. “A fae is not the same as a fairy. Faes are magical beings known for tricking people, speaking in circles, and making unfair bargains. It’s a different thing altogether.”

Widening her eyes, the girl slowly turned red as she realized her mistake. But unwilling to back down, she countered, “So you’re saying Luke is ugly? He’s not!”

*What is this girl going on about?* Luke thought to himself, bewildered by her line of reasoning.

He understood she was stubbornly sticking to her failed argument because she hated being wrong and was in denial, but this particular defense was…unusual, to say the least.

Though he couldn’t deny that he felt a bit flattered.

“I meant—” Ryan started, glancing from Luke’s amused expression to Annabeth’s scowl and then up at the sky. With a deep sigh, he muttered, “I didn’t actually say that. Besides, it’s not relevant to this discussion.”

“But it is—“

“Well, Annabeth, isn’t that Clarisse over there?” Luke interjected, pointing to a spot some distance away where the aforementioned kid was struggling to keep up with a jogging Peter.

Immediately, the blonde girl turned in the direction Luke had pointed. Since the horde affair and that ‘duel’ situation, she had formed a somewhat begrudging friendship with the older girl, though she would never admit it. When asked, she would insist that they were rivals because their parents were rivals. However, in Luke’s humble opinion, they were friends—just the kind who argued and fought a lot more than usual.

As Annabeth hurried off toward the Ares campers, Luke turned back to Ryan, now able to speak more freely without worrying about the presence of a child.

“I heard you backed my reinstatement and even supported Cabin Five when they pushed for it.”

Studying him with sharp gray eyes, the older man briefly glanced at his sister, who was now play-fighting with Clarisse, and then shifted his focus to Peter, who was attentively watching

the scene.

Finally, he declared, “We might not be friends, Castellan, but I do respect you.”

“I’m sure your support was purely out of ‘respect.’” The blonde drawled, clearly unconvinced by that claim.

For Cabin Six to have allied with Cabin Five, something must have happened. Luke needed to find out what urgently, so he could address any issues his brother might have caused during his…absence.

That reminded him he still needed to talk to Edward.

The night before, after Luke had been cleared to leave the infirmary and return to his cabin, his brother had looked at him as if he were a ghost, tried and failed several times to speak, and then simply gone to bed.

Luke couldn’t blame him; he had reacted in much the same way, though with a bit more dignity.

Smirking slightly at the younger demigod’s evident skepticism, Ryan met his gaze with a glint in his gaze and said, “It’s the truth. I really do respect you. Edward hasn’t shown the same skill or capability.” He sighed in disappointment, continuing, “Debating with him was no challenge—too easy. You could talk circles around me, but him? He just lied, and it was painfully obvious. Very predictable.” Stroking his chin in thought, he added absentmindedly, his eyes gleaming with a peculiar light, “Though I can’t deny it’s entertaining, just in a different way.”

Luke couldn’t believe this man only wanted him back as counselor so he could keep arguing with him.

“I see.” He uttered dryly, giving the son of Athena a judgmental once-over. “Your faith in my abilities is appreciated.”

“This is exactly what I mean.” Ryan chuckled, his gray eyes flashing like sharpened blades. “You leave so much unsaid, and from that comment, it’s clear you don’t appreciate my efforts as much as you should.” Lowering his voice to little more than a whisper as Peter approached, he added, “Everyone else was surprised when you disappeared, but not me. I even took it upon myself to make a few adjustments, to prepare the ground for your return, if you will.”

Puzzled, Luke stared at the gray-eyed man, trying to figure out what he meant, since he found that statement to be weirdly ominous. But his thoughts were cut short when Wu arrived.

"Luke, I’m glad to see you’re finally well enough to be out and about.” The older demigod greeted, crossing his arms and addressing the blonde without even glancing at Ryan, who simply rolled his eyes and watched the interaction silently. “When can we start sparring again?”

“Not for a while.” Luke replied, clearly exasperated. “I still need a few more weeks of rest.”

At least one person was acting normally: Peter was still the same single-minded battle junkie as ever. Honestly, it was quite refreshing not to be treated differently after his coma.

Frowning, Wu clicked his tongue in annoyance but conceded with a reluctant nod. “A shame, but I suppose it will be a better duel if you're at your best, so I'll tolerate the wait.”

“I appreciate your restraint.” The blonde muttered sarcastically, but his comment was promptly ignored.

“Wu.” Ryan interjected, his expression showing clear displeasure as he watched the sparring girls, with Annabeth shoving Clarisse’s face into the dirt. “What exactly have you been teaching my sister?”

Peter turned around slowly, as if just now noticing Ryan’s presence, and replied with furrowed brows, “To survive.”

“Survive? By turning her into a barbarian like you?” The son of Athena retorted, straightening up to his full height, though he was still noticeably shorter than the other man.

Even so, both were much taller than Luke, so he had no real grounds to call Ryan short. After all, the son of Athena was five years older, and Peter, though only two years his senior, was so unusually tall that he nearly grazed the tops of doorways.

But then again, Peter was Peter—he was anything but ordinary.

At any rate, he felt disturbingly alike a house cat stuck between two big, wild dogs, one of which was noticeably more rabid than the other.

“A warrior.” The son of Ares corrected. “If you hadn’t been teaching her ineffective methods, she wouldn’t have needed to come to us.”

The gray-eyed man's nostrils flared, and his face reddened, the color stark against his pale skin. Gritting his teeth, he demanded, “Are you implying that Cabin Six’s style is ineffective?”

“Was that your cabin’s style?” Wu asked, looking genuinely puzzled. Then he added, unintentionally coming across as deeply insulting, “I expected better from our rivals.”

Watching the head counselor of Cabin Six puff up his chest, clearly preparing to demonstrate just how flawed his cabin’s methods were, Luke realized with growing dismay that he needed to step in before things escalated into a full-blown fight.

A brawl between two grown men would surely be far more devastating than one between two young girls.

“Well, Annabeth is still young.” Luke spoke up hastily, drawing the attention of both older demigods—one with a placid expression, the other with visible irritation. “She might not be fully skilled in her cabin’s techniques yet; she is still new to this.”

Humming thoughtfully, Peter paused, glanced at the girls, then back at the son of Athena, and suggested, “Perhaps you should invest more time in training the younger campers and improving their skills.”

Ryan was finally starting to calm down after Luke's intervention, but Wu's latest comment seemed to immediately spike his blood pressure once more.

*Ah, Peter, why do you have to be like this? Just after I managed to pacify him a little, too.*

“We teach them other things—important things like strategy and tactics—at first. When they’re older, we focus more on combat.” Ryan uttered through gritted teeth, clearly struggling to keep his temper in check—an effort for which the blonde was eternally grateful for.

He had no desire to break up a fight between two men bigger than him, especially when he still felt quite frail. With his luck, he’d probably end up on the receiving end of a beating.

However, he could admit it was actually quite amusing to see how much Ryan was rattled by the son of Ares, though Luke suspected it had more to do with Peter’s knack for pushing all the wrong buttons and the long-standing rivalry between Athena and Ares. Plus, Wu had a way of speaking bluntly, with no regard for how his words might be perceived. For those unaccustomed to his straightforwardness, everything he said could easily come across as an insult.

“I see.” Peter said, though his tone made it clear he wasn’t seeing it at all; it seemed he was simply done with the discussion. Turning to Luke and disregarding Ryan yet again, he added, “Now that you’re recovered, you should get back to helping me with the lessons for my cabin. Your brother will only join if you’re there.”

Feeling Ryan’s intense gaze on his profile but doing his best to ignore it, Luke replied, “I’ll be there. Just don’t expect me to do more than offer a few tips.”

“That’s fine, I’ll take care of the fighting.” Peter stated with a nod. Then, without missing a beat, he called out, “Clarisse! We’re heading out, try to keep up!”

He started jogging off immediately as he spoke, leaving Luke and Ryan bewildered. Clarisse quickly followed, giving Annabeth a final shove before dashing after Peter.

“You seem quite close with Cabin Five.” The older man observed lightly, regaining his composure as his sister began to approach them now that her friend had left.

“Yes.” Luke replied, briefly studying Ryan’s face, curious as to why this was the topic the son of Athena had chosen to bring up.

He was fairly certain that everyone already knew about his connections with Cabin Five.

“And you even teach those brutes.” The older demigod continued, trying to sound casual, though his eyes glinted with a dangerous edge, as if he were deep in thought about something.

Luke was finally beginning to understand what the other man was getting at.

“I’m not going to tell you what we do there. If you want to find out, you’ll have to see for yourself.”

Huffing, Ryan responded, “I wasn’t suggesting you spy on them—what they’re taught is already fairly obvious. What I meant was whether you could offer similar assistance to my cabin.” Grimacing, he continued, “As much as it pains me to agree with anything that brute says, Annabeth could really use more practice. Her fighting skills are limited to street brawling, and that knife she picked up is more of a danger to her than a help, since she doesn’t have proper training. I don’t have the time to give her the attention she needs, and it seems she actually likes you.”

*And you think I somehow have time when you don’t?* Luke thought unkindly to himself.

His afternoons were already packed with responsibilities for Cabin Five, not to mention his counselor duties, which were demanding enough given that his cabin was the largest in the entire Camp.

Now, Cabin Six wanted his attention as well?

Though if it was just Annabeth, he might find a way to fit her in—perhaps blend her into the Eleven activities or integrate her with his younger siblings.

Ideally, he would have just thrown her into Cabin Five’s lessons if he had the choice, but he doubted Ryan would accept that. The man still seemed to be in denial about how well his sister was getting along with their long-time rivals.

Before he could respond, Annabeth finally reached them, dirty and scraped but clearly having had a lot of fun.

“Annie.” Ryan began, grimacing at her appearance but choosing not to comment. He'd probably pass her off to one of his other sisters for cleanup later. “Castellan here will help you with your combat lessons.”

What? Luke didn’t recall agreeing to that at all.

Eyes sparkling like polished silver, Annabeth turned to Luke and squealed excitedly, “Really?” Without waiting for an answer, she continued, nearly vibrating with anticipation, “I can’t wait! Clarisse won’t know what hit her the next time we duel!”

Seeing how thrilled the girl was about the prospect of training with him, Luke couldn’t bring himself to object. Instead, he shot a silent glare at the older man when Annabeth wasn’t looking, which was met with a self-satisfied smirk.

He really was a pompous asshole.

*Friend of the devil. Son of the antichrist. Agent of chaos,* Luke furiously cursed Ryan in his mind, running out of unflattering labels for the moment but knowing he’d add more as inspiration struck later.

“I’ll reach out later to arrange the days and times.” The son of Athena declared smugly, his eyes flashing with a hint of victory. Without giving Luke a chance to protest, he turned to his sister, taking her hand with a slight grimace, and said with a click of his tongue, “Let’s head back. You *really* need a bath.”

As he watched the siblings walk away, he was struck by an eerie sense of déjà vu. Then, with a flash of clarity, he realized that Peter had done something almost identical.

With a hint of malicious satisfaction, he resolved to bring up the comparison the next time he spoke to Ryan. The thought of seeing that arrogant man flush with anger almost made Luke giddy with anticipation for his small, petty revenge.

Immediately, the demigod grimaced and rubbed his chest as he felt the foreign energy within him pulse faintly.

It was a peculiar sensation he wasn’t used to, and there was little he could do about it. Sometimes, the energy seemed to make its presence felt at random, but he had noticed a pattern: it appeared to respond to emotions and even tried to mirror them. The longer this strange behavior continued, the more Luke thought he sensed a faint hint of curiosity from the aura, though he doubted it was anything more than wishful thinking.

For the sake of his own sanity, it was best not to trust it at all.

Sighing, he kicked his foot against the ground, contemplating what to do next. He had been given nearly the entire day off, with only the lighter activities and lessons on his schedule—those that required minimal physical effort.

In the end, he had little contact with his cabin today. He hadn’t even had a chance to see his brother, who seemed to avoid him as soon as he got close.

People might say he was being soft or foolish for wanting to reach out to Ed, but despite all his brother’s flaws, he was still family. Besides, Luke disagreed with the way their father handled the situation and wanted to address it, even if it meant confronting his brother.

And he also wanted to understand. Why was Edward like this? Why did he make the choices he did?

Luke would only find out if he had a conversation with the man in question.

Calming his nerves, despite the unease he felt about the upcoming conversation, the blonde decided to walk around and visit the places he knew Edward liked to frequent, hoping he might run into him.

He marched around, checking the arena, the pegasus stables he had briefly passed earlier—now scrutinizing them more closely in case he had overlooked something—and even the part of the forest where they held Capture the Flag weekly. But Edward was nowhere to be found.

Puzzled, Luke was about to head off to explore other areas when Dean’s voice called out, stopping him in his tracks.

“Little bird is adventuring now that he’s allowed out of his cage, I see.”

Wincing, Luke turned to face his friend, who was leaning against a tree with crossed arms and an unimpressed expression, a hint of reproach on his face.

“I’m searching for Edward.” The demigod answered weakly, feeling cowed for some reason.

Dean pressed his lips together in silence, then moved closer until he stood right in front of the blonde. Then, he announced, “I know where he is.”

Perking up, Luke blurted out, “You do?”

“Yes, but before I let you loose on him, we need to have a *talk*.” The satyr replied with a serious expression, standing his ground.

Swallowing hard, the blonde marveled at how a goat could be so intimidating.

Wetting his lips anxiously, Luke glanced around the forest, but it was empty except for the two of them—no nymphs lurking or spying in sight.

“Sit down.” Dean ordered, gesturing to a rock. He settled onto another one, crossing his arms and legs, his expression unfriendly.

It seemed like Luke had no way out of this situation. Feeling like he was backed into a corner, he sat on the rock, bracing himself for the inevitable reprimand. The expression on Dean’s face promised nothing but a lecture; it was clear that harsh words were coming.

He didn’t have to wait long for it to begin.

“Not only do you throw yourself into a horde of monsters, but you also decide to escape Camp and take on the most dangerous quest imaginable.”

“I didn’t choose the quest.” Luke protested, defending himself on the one point where he wasn’t at fault.

“And does it matter if you chose it or not?” Dean countered pointedly, his bushy brows knitted together so tightly that his forehead resembled a rugged landscape of creases. “In the end, you still escaped, risked your life, and endangered your friends too—Levi was the one who suffered the consequences because of it all.”

Flinching back, the demigod curled his lips in a mix of anger and guilt, turning his face to the side to avoid his friend’s gaze.

The satyr sighed, though his tone remained stern, “I understand how tempting it can be to take on a quest, to prove yourself and all that. But this isn’t a game—you can die, Luke!”

“I’m well aware it’s not a game—probably better than most.” The demigod lashed out, turning sharply to face the other boy.

Dean studied him in silence for a moment, then snapped his eyes shut as if in pain. When he opened them again, he appeared older and more vulnerable, as if life had dealt him a heavy share of punishment.

“Honestly, I should have told you this a long time ago, but it never seemed like the right moment. But maybe this will make you understand.”

Luke furrowed his eyebrows in confusion at the sudden shift in topic but didn’t protest the direction the conversation was taking.

Pausing for a brief moment to compose himself as best he could, Dean’s voice trembled as he finally spoke, his words spilling out like a torrent.

“You…had a sister named Carolina. I was her Protector, just as I am for you.” He closed his eyes, his voice thick with regret. “But I failed her.” Opening his eyes and staring at a distant point with a pained expression, he continued, “She was bullied constantly by the unclaimed, to the point where she felt she had to prove herself by taking on a quest—she refused to listen when we told her not to go. When it became clear she wouldn’t budge, Edward and Aubrey offered to join her, but she decided to go with two others instead.” He took a shaky breath and added, “One of them was me.” Meeting Luke’s gaze, he spoke with deep anguish, almost pleading. "I tried, I really did, but it wasn’t enough. I came back, but she didn’t. Aubrey and Edward never truly forgave me for it. Since then, the unclaimed have been your brother’s target, the reason for his sister’s death."

Stunned into silence, Luke’s mind circled around this new piece of information, slotting it into his understanding of his brother as if it were the key piece he hadn’t realized was missing. It also clarified why Aubrey had treated Dean the way she did.

*We're just a bunch of deeply traumatized children, even me,* the demigod thought to himself.

The realization didn’t comfort him; if anything, it made him feel even worse.

Like an unwelcome, intrusive guest, the aura enveloped him in a somewhat clumsy attempt at soothing, eerily reminiscent of the way Mr. D had tried to comfort him a few days ago.

Shaking himself out of his daze, Luke turned his attention to his friend, who watched him with sad eyes. Dean, his shoulders hunched as if bracing for judgment, remained silent and waited for the younger boy to speak.

“Thanks for telling me, and for trusting me with it.” The demigod finally said in a quiet voice.

He felt no need to blame his friend for something beyond his control; that would be like kicking a dog that was already down.

Dean looked surprised, then coughed slightly before quickly masking his expression. However, the relief he felt was evident and hard to conceal.

Clearing his throat, he admitted with a sad frown after a moment of heavy silence, “I don’t want you to end up like her, Luke. Please don’t endanger yourself for stupid reasons when it can be avoided.”

“I won’t.” The younger boy reassured, softening his voice and striving to project confidence, even though he wasn’t entirely sure if he could comply with that wish.

A demigod’s life was full of dangers, and he had learned that even within the supposed safety of Camp Half-Blood, things were never as secure as they would be in a normal mortal’s life.

How could he feel safe when his own father had demanded he undertake one of the most dangerous quests conceivable within its borders?

The sudden longing to visit his grandmother grew like a leech inside his heart. He missed her terribly—she was the only family member still in full possession of her mental faculties, the only normal and sane presence left in his life.

Ever since Mr. D had revealed he knew where she was, Luke had daydreamed about reuniting with her.

Would she be much different? Would she recognize him? These questions frequently occupied his mind, but each time, they were interrupted by the aura within his chest making its presence known, reminding him of the dangers that lay beyond the barriers of the only safe haven his kind had.

Inside Camp, he was as safe as he could be. But outside, that Roman god could find him easily. Despite the fear this sparked in him, Luke couldn’t stop debating with himself.

He knew it would be wiser to stay and forget about seeing his grandma, yet the thought stubbornly persisted.

After all, Uncle D had left the decision up to Luke, offering to accompany him if he chose to go. Now, the demigod was seriously considering taking him up on that offer.

Maybe the foreign god wouldn’t dare show up with a Greek deity nearby. Luke figured it might be seen as a diplomatic incident or a major faux pas, or something along those lines—that’s what he hoped for, anyway.

“Is there something bothering you?” Dean asked worriedly, frowning in concern. Belatedly, the blonde realized he had been lost in thought for far too long.

Shaking his head, Luke forced a reassuring smile, though it didn't quite convince his friend, and replied, “I’m just thinking about my problems, you know?”

“I know things have been chaotic, but you’ll overcome it. I believe in you.” Dean said firmly. Taking a deep breath, he stood up and extended a hand to the younger boy. “I’ll keep my promise. Come on, I’ll take you to where Edward is.”

Taking the offered hand and rising, the demigod felt his nervousness intensify as he neared the confrontation with his brother. Distracted and lost in thought, he paid little attention to

their surroundings; even the aura lightly stirring within him did little to pull him out of his anxious state.

Luke only realized they were retracing his steps when they passed the cabins and heard Charlie, the head chief of the Aphrodite gang, starting a cheer by chanting ‘Saint Luke’ loudly. This instantly caused the other children of the Foam-Born to join in, their eyes gleaming with a frightening glint—like sharks smelling blood.

The unexpected attention jolted him out of his stupor, and he instinctively shot them a disapproving glare while tensing up as if to run away. Charlie, however, only laughed mockingly and winked at him with a mischievous leer, though that was the extent of her antics; surprisingly, she didn’t do anything more to mess with him.

Suspicious. Very, very suspicious.

Hastily avoiding eye contact and ignoring the cackles from the hyena pack, he concentrated on the path Dean was taking.

The route didn’t lead to any of the usual places where Edward might be found, which struck the blonde as strange. Yet, considering how unusual the older demigod had been acting the last time they met, this deviation could be another sign of that odd behavior.

Soon enough, they were approaching the Camp Half-Blood barriers—a place his brother typically avoided unless he had a quest. Just as Luke was about to question Dean about their destination, he noticed a figure seated near Thalia’s tree.

The silhouette was far too large to be Annabeth’s, and she was definitely back in her own cabin by now.

Staring at Dean with a confused frown, Luke pointed toward the figure in silence. The satyr merely nodded, gave him a reassuring pat on the shoulder, and then walked away, leaving the demigod alone without any explanation as to why his brother was at his least favorite spot in Camp.

He stood there for a while, pep-talking himself, before finally summoning the courage to approach.

With newfound resolve, he marched over to where Edward sat, staring melancholically at the horizon—or at least that’s how it seemed to the blonde, though he couldn’t make out the older demigod’s expression from where he stood.

“Edward.” Luke called out, making the man startle in surprise before he tensed up, recognizing the voice.

Turning slowly to face him, Ed greeted the other demigod with a hesitant, “Luke,” his eyes darting around the place without ever settling on his younger brother.

Studying the squirming man for a moment, Luke had to admit his brother didn’t look his best —he seemed down, which wasn’t surprising given that he had lost his position and been

humiliated in front of everyone all at once.

“Can I sit here?” He asked, more out of courtesy than concern about bothering the other demigod.

He was determined not to let the older man avoid this conversation, even though he, too, felt distinctly uncomfortable.

Widening his eyes slightly, Ed nodded hastily and replied a bit clumsily, “Ah, yes!”

Quietly, he sat down next to the older man, feeling somewhat lost now that he was here. All the carefully rehearsed lines he had in his head seemed to evaporate, leaving him feeling awkward and at a loss for words.

Fortunately, it seemed he wouldn’t have to start the conversation after all.

“Luke—” Ed began, then cut himself off and took a deep breath, as if bracing himself. He continued, somewhat awkwardly, “I’m sorry.”

Glancing at his brother, who flinched under the weight of the younger boy’s gaze but, to his credit, didn’t avoid eye contact, Luke examined the man’s sincerity. Edward looked miserable, his hazel eyes reddened with dark shadows beneath them, as if he hadn’t slept well for a while. He was hunched and curled inward, as though weighed down by a great burden.

Whether this stemmed from genuine guilt or merely wounded pride remained to be seen.

“For what?” Luke replied, his voice bland and carefully neutral. He then began to list the other man’s wrongdoings, his tone growing harsher with each point. “For causing my concussion? For the mess you made in our cabin? Or is it simply because you finally did something that crossed the line?”

Closing his eyes, as if that could somehow shield him from the consequences of his own actions, Edward seemed to shrink even further. The words appeared to add to the weight on his shoulders, making him seem even smaller.

Staring at his brother in silence, Luke breathed heavily after his tirade, huffing in annoyance. He rubbed his face with one hand, then let it fall to his side with a sigh. Turning back to gaze at the outside world, he asked, “Why did you do it?”

“I—I wanted…to have what the other cabins have.” Ed admitted, sounding so fragile that it felt he might shatter with one wrong move. “I just wanted us to pretend, even if only for a moment, that we weren’t the unwanted, rundown cabin—that we were actually respected.”

“And did it work? Did treating our guests like shit make us any more respected?” The blonde asked pointedly, refusing to coddle a grown man.

No matter his reasons—reasons Luke understood all too well, having lost people himself and endured the conditions of their shitty cabin—Ed's actions couldn’t be excused so easily.

“No. It didn’t.” The older man’s voice seemed strained, as if he was forcing himself to admit the truth.

However, as the younger boy glanced at him out of the corner of his eye, the other demigod appeared conflicted. A hint of remorse crossed his face, making his exhaustion more evident, though there was also anger—at what, Luke couldn’t tell.

Still, the presence of guilt was a silver lining; it meant his brother wasn’t entirely beyond hope.

“You crossed the line, brother. You know that.” Luke stated seriously, staring directly at Ed. “You’ve been impulsive, impatient, and even vindictive before, but you never would have sunk this low.” He paused, then added, “So what happened? I’m asking again—why did you do this? Really.”

Hesitating, Ed averted his gaze and focused on Thalia’s tree, his mouth opening and closing as his lips trembled. Finally, he stammered, “I’m not as smart or as fast, and I’m not nearly as brave. I’m not good with people either. All I have is being bigger, older, and stronger, but that doesn’t help with leading others. When I became counselor, I was finally in the role I’d wanted for years, but I didn’t know what I was supposed to do.” He glanced at his younger brother. “Aubrey trained *you* for leadership. She never wanted me to have the role.”

Huffing in irritation, Luke rolled his eyes at the self-pity, unable to tolerate people playing the victim, especially when they were to blame. With a mocking tone, he retorted, “I *really* wonder why she didn’t want you as counselor. I can’t even guess what her reasons might have been.”

“I know I fucked up, okay?” Ed exclaimed, his brows furrowed and eyes welling up as he looked away. His voice wavered as he continued, “*I know*.”

“Of course you did!” Luke exploded, his anger boiling over. “What were you thinking? These were kids—kids!—and you forced this ridiculous division on them!” He advanced on his brother, hissing directly in his face and pointing outside the barriers. “You were supposed to be the adult, to treat them fairly and keep them safe—this is the only safe place they have while monsters are after us outside! You know this! Aubrey, Levi, Carolina—”

“Do not speak of her!” Edward shouted, his hazel eyes blazing with fury as he stood up abruptly, towering over his younger brother.

“Or what?” The blonde demigod shot back, his tone dripping with spite. “Are you going to put me in the infirmary again? Maybe this time I won’t wake up at all.”

Flinching as if he had been struck, the older man averted his gaze, pressing his lips together and falling silent.

Turning away to avoid the urge to punch his brother, Luke began to pace, struggling to regain his composure.

Yet again, the damned parasite in his chest stirred, pulsing more erratically this time. As much as he hated to admit it, it managed to calm him, drawing his attention away from his brother's unhinged actions and reminding him that he had bigger problems than one stupid familial conflict.

"Look." He began, turning back to Edward with a tense expression, fingers pressing against his temples. "I want to understand. And if it helps, I agree that what our father did to you was uncalled for and completely unacceptable."

Edward gazed at him with an unreadable expression, then sighed and sank back into the ground. Covering his face with his hands, he spoke in a barely audible voice, "Fine. Ask your questions."

Remaining standing, Luke took a moment to gather his thoughts before voicing his main concern, "Why create even more division in the cabin, Edward?"

"You know why." The older man answered, his voice steady but showing a trace of unease. "I'd rather reserve our limited comfort for us, the actual children of the Messenger, than to offer it to outsiders intruding on our space."

"*Offer*?" Luke scoffed, unable to control the derisive sound. "Preventing people from eating with the others and forcing them to sleep on the floor when there were plenty of beds available is not 'reserving our limited comfort to ourselves,' Edward."

Furrowing his brow and clicking his tongue, the other demigod pulled his hands slightly away from his face, revealing one hazel eye peeking at the blonde from behind his fingers.

"They rioted, Luke. As soon as you left and didn't show up for dinner, things went downhill fast. I know they didn't like me, and I'm not too fond of them either. But I thought they'd be more controlled." Ed revealed, his gaze fixed on his younger brother. He let out a scornful laugh, letting his hands drop to his lap before adding, "I had to act. They were starting to target the younger ones too, just like they did to *you* when you first got here."

Pausing for a moment, the blonde hesitated before replying, "Katherine would have let me know if things got that bad."

"Who says she knew?" Ed snorted. "Those rats were clever. They kept her out of their schemes. After all, she's your friend and gets along with our younger brothers—of course she wouldn't have stood for it. Besides, she spent almost all her time in the infirmary, taking care of you."

Cabin Eleven was perpetually on the brink of collapse, with tensions rising and falling randomly.

It was no surprise that things deteriorated further when Ed, who had always been vehemently opposed to the unclaimed intruding on their space, took over. If his friends' reports about the situation after the quest were accurate and what Edward was implying was true, then the chaos had likely reached a level Luke had never seen before.

Even so, he couldn't bring himself to agree with the methods his brother had used to impose order.

"Still, did you need to escalate things this way?" Luke asked, his frown deepening with disapproval.

Edward's face shifted through a range of emotions before settling into a weary expression. With a remorseful sigh, he finally said, "I shouldn't have. I know and I'm sorry."

"You shouldn't be apologizing to me." The younger demigod retorted, his voice firm. "You should be apologizing to Inês—and to the other unclaimed."

While he still believed his brother needed to humble himself—preferably quite thoroughly—to earn forgiveness after nearly knocking his brains out, he recognized that, in this situation, he wasn't the one who should receive such apologies.

Thankfully, the older man didn't argue—perhaps due to his guilt. Either way, he exhaled deeply and nodded in agreement.

However, there was still one thing that bothered Luke about all of this, especially after what Ryan had said earlier.

"Ed…" He called softly, turning to face his brother with a frown. "Why did Cabin Six get involved?"

Edward froze still, his expression abruptly closing off. For a brief moment, Luke glimpsed a flash of unease and anger before his brother quickly masked it.

"I don't know."

"Really?" Luke remarked, his skepticism clear. "Ryan—"

Flinching at the name, his older brother abruptly turned to him and repeated, "I don't know. I really don't know."

"If you say so." The blonde muttered, casting a doubtful look at the other demigod.

"I do say so." Ed retorted, regaining some composure and raising a challenging eyebrow at Luke, who simply rolled his eyes. He then stood, casting tense glances around the space before turning back to his younger brother. His expression became awkward again as he added, "I'm sorry, you know, for—" He gestured vaguely toward Luke's head. "It wasn't my intention." Swallowing hard, he continued, "I was worried when you didn't wake. And when I heard it was due to the concussion…"

Luke hummed thoughtfully as he studied his brother. The remorse seemed genuine, but it was clear that the part about not knowing anything was a lie.

Deciding not to press the issue further, he stood up and declared, "I hear you, but you'll need to do better than this to earn my forgiveness."

“I understand.” Ed sighed, looking resigned as he rose to his feet as well.

Once again, they exchanged awkward glances before his brother cleared his throat and began to walk away, giving a half-hearted wave as he went off to whatever occupied his free time.

Luke watched him go with furrowed brows, leaning against Thalia’s tree as he mulled over the situation.

It was clear now that the son of Athena was involved in the chaos that had erupted in Cabin Eleven—he had practically confessed as much.

This realization gave the blonde some relief, knowing that his brother wasn’t entirely to blame.

Edward had been the one who comforted him when Aubrey died, and that meant something to him.

Besides, it made sense.

Athena was the goddess of the more 'refined' aspects of warfare—though that label was debatable, given that war was never pretty—which essentially meant strategy and tactics. Both of which were things all the brain spawn prided themselves on.

As much as the children of the Owl-Eyed liked to view themselves as superior, the truth was that strategy could be just as brutal as the actual conflict—if not more so—since it often required a certain level of coldness to devise and execute effective, sometimes even cruel, plans.

If this theory proved true, Luke would need to make it clear to that disciple of Judas that he had to redeem himself with his brother—he was convinced Ryan had done something to Ed—and make amends for the chaos he had incited in Cabin Eleven.

It wouldn’t be particularly difficult—annoying, certainly—but he had something Ryan wanted, so he just needed to play his cards right.

Whistling with a cheerful air now that things seemed to be improving—he was head counselor again, his brother was acting like a real sibling rather than a rival, and he was relieved to know Ed wasn’t hiding some dark side—Luke headed away from the Camp’s limits and back toward the cabins as dinner time approached.

Even the reminder that he still needed to read his father’s letter couldn't dampen his mood.

Chapter End Notes

So, regarding the aftermath of Luke’s coma: Annabeth didn’t take it well at all. As for Ryan and Peter, I thought it would be interesting to parallel their dynamics with those of

their sisters, though with more aggression. I find it ironic that Peter, a son of Ares, is the unbothered side of this dynamic.

About Ryan, he's not that bad. We have to remember that other cabins don't understand how Cabin Eleven operates; it's simply that rundown cabin some people stay in for a short while until their parent claims them and then promptly forget about. Besides, Camp was in chaos, so Ryan took the opportunity to maneuver the chess pieces around. He did what an Athena kid does in a situation of conflict: strategize a way to win at all costs. War cabins will do as war cabins do. Though I'm sure he didn't expect Hermes to appear in the flesh, lol.

And yes, people, Edward does have a conscience under…everything. He's a traumatized guy, but much of his behavior is just his personality. As the second oldest, he feels a strong sense of responsibility for his siblings—quite a family-oriented man, not unlike Luke. During the coma weeks, he was desperate, making him an easy target for those with less than noble intentions *wink*Ryan*wink*.

Thanks for reading!!! As always, I love to hear your thoughts and theories! ❤️❤️❤️

# Chapter 26: Teenhood - Investigation

Chapter Summary

A letter is read, a deal is made and a dog is forgiven

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was a Sunday, and like most Sundays, the campers had the entire day free to do as they pleased—whether that meant lounging in bed for as long as they wanted, doing nothing of consequence, or skipping the usual routines of training and studying.

At the present moment, Luke was doing precisely that: nothing.

He lay sprawled on his bed, hands crossed over his chest, staring up at the underside of the upper bunk in quiet contemplation. His gaze, seemingly of its own accord, drifted to the bedside table where the letter lay innocently for the hundredth time.

Luke had promised himself that today he would finally learn what his father wanted. Yet as soon as the letter was in his grasp, his courage vanished, and he found himself sinking back into bed, procrastinating once again.

The worst part was that this cycle had repeated throughout the entire morning.

After breakfast, he had been determined to get the favor over with and fulfill his part of the deal. However, as his mind spun through various scenarios of what his father might want, he ended up simply staring at the unopened piece of paper for minutes, his gaze wide and unblinking.

Eventually, he had given up and tried to take a nap, but it was in vain; he couldn't sleep at all. His mind remained fixated on the letter, obsessively circling around the problem.

"You're still on this?" Ed asked with raised brows, sitting on the ground with the Stoll brothers in front of him. He was attempting to distract the hyperactive kids with various activities that the blonde hadn't bothered to pay attention to.

It was their deal: he had some time to breathe and work through his issues without the constant presence of two clingy children, while the older man kept them entertained.

After their heart-to-heart talk, Luke felt he could trust Ed more. It was clear that his brother was genuinely trying to make amends—he had sought out the unclaimed to apologize for his behavior over the past few days, pointedly focusing on those recent actions rather than his

overall attitude, and had even braved the nightmarish Barbie house that was Cabin Ten to apologize to Inês.

Well, he was still the same prejudiced little shit as ever, but he was making an effort. Luke couldn't say he was ready to forgive him just yet, but it didn't seem as distant a possibility anymore.

"Yeah." He sighed and sat up cross-legged on his bed, observing Travis and Connor playing with some bottles that seemed strangely familiar. Shaking his head, he continued, "I don't know, I just don't feel like reading it, I guess."

"I get it." Ed remarked, casting a cautious glance at the Stoll brothers as they tossed the jars back and forth. Then, with a teasing but slightly sharp edge, he added, "It's kind of funny that dad's favorite doesn't seem to care about him."

Curling his lip at the ribbing, the younger demigod huffed and rolled his eyes, replying, "Yeah, sure, *favorite*—if you're talking about his favorite lackey."

Staring at him from the corner of his eye with one raised eyebrow, Ed deftly caught a bottle that Travis had sent flying before it hit the ground and offered some advice, "You know, this restlessness won't go away until you read it. It might be better to just get it over with. At least then you'll know what it's about, and maybe your mind will stop imagining scary scenarios."

Luke hated to admit it, but his brother was right. It seemed that once in a blue moon, a sliver of wisdom managed to escape the landmine that was Edward's brain, leading to a genuinely useful comment.

Pursing his lips, the blonde hesitated, made a face, and then, before he could change his mind, grabbed the letter and tore it open.

The handwriting was even more atrocious than the last message his father had sent—barely legible and splotched with heavy drops of ink as if the pen had been pressed too hard against the paper, with some sections visibly torn from the excessive pressure. Interestingly enough, some parts were heavily scribbled out—quite thoroughly, in fact.

Narrowing his eyes as he tried to decipher the message with, frankly, little enthusiasm, Luke absentmindedly wondered if Mr. D's claim that Hermes wouldn't have time to bother him anytime soon was actually true. Judging by the state of the paper, he'd wager it was probably accurate.

*Son, I've done my part of the deal. Sadly, I can't stay to see you wake up or visit when it happens, so I'm sending this letter for you to read once you're awake.* Some parts of the message were scribbled out so heavily that Luke couldn't make out the rest. *In any case, our deal isn't finished yet. The favor you owe me is very simple: just side with me. From now on, I'm your patron deity.*

*Remember that.*

*P.S: Do not leave Camp Half-Blood for the time being.*

Immediately, Luke set the message down as if it had burned him.

The whole reason he'd agreed to take on that quest was to reduce his father's possible leverage over him. Instead, it had backfired spectacularly. Hermes had seized the opportunity—more cleverly than the demigod cared to admit—to tighten his grip, using this ridiculous notion of patronage to exert even more influence over him.

Luke had been clear that the favor should be minor—how could patronage possibly qualify as minor?

Rubbing his face in frustration, he contemplated this new…situation.

In theory, it should have been beneficial—his father could offer protection, blessings, or other forms of assistance. *However*, the arrangement came with expectations that felt more burdensome for Luke than for Hermes. While the god could show up and offer boons whenever he remembered his son existed—easy for a deity—Luke was saddled with the need for dedicated worship, symbolic representations, and, worst of all, the *obligations* that his father could impose on a whim.

Exhaling heavily and ignoring the curious stares of all three of his brothers, Luke grabbed the message again. He placed it back into the envelope more forcefully than he intended, feeling a stiffer section that he hadn't noticed before. Frowning, he turned it upside down, and a silver trinket fell out.

It was a miniature caduceus—a bracelet charm that he was certain would fit perfectly on the gift Aubrey had given him, the one he wore everywhere. He picked it up and fiddled with it absentmindedly, fighting the urge to hurl it out the window and be done with it. Deep down, though, he knew that doing so wouldn't solve any of his problems.

"So, I'm guessing by your expression that it wasn't good news." Edward remarked with feigned nonchalance, trying to sneak a look at what Luke was holding. Travis and Connor, meanwhile, were peering over with far less subtlety.

Immediately, he closed his fist around the caduceus to shield it from the curious stares of his nosy brothers, who gave him innocent looks that Luke saw right through. With an arched eyebrow, he shot back, "Oh, look at that—seems we've got a detective among us."

The Stolls instantly burst into giggles, while Ed scrunched his face at the uncalled-for jab, giving the blonde a decidedly unimpressed look.

"Very funny, birdie."

Smirking slightly, Luke casually stood up, sliding his hands into his pockets and subtly tucking the bracelet charm away as he approached the other demigods. Leaning in to examine the bottles that had piqued his curiosity earlier, he shifted the topic with a pointed question directed at his older brother, "And what's this?"

Edward glanced sideways and cleared his throat before answering, "Oh, nothing much. Just teaching them some things that'll come in handy later."

“Yeah!” Travis exclaimed, lifting a bottle and waving it in front of the blonde’s face. “It’s for pranks!”

Taking the offered jar before it could hit his face due to his little brother’s sheer enthusiasm, the blonde opened it and examined its contents. The smell hit him first, invading his nostrils and making his eyes water. It was metallic and slightly earthy—familiar and completely unmistakable. Ignoring the overpowering stench, Luke studied the liquid inside with a scrutinizing look, then shot a sidelong glance at the older demigod, who was pointedly avoiding his gaze.

“A prank, huh?”

He couldn’t believe Edward was handing out centaur’s blood to two little kids and even instructing them how to use it against unsuspecting, innocent people.

Travis and Connor nodded, and the latter, fidgeting with his hands, spoke up, “It’s for when people are mean to us.”

Pausing for a split-second, Luke turned to face his younger brothers and asked calmly, “Who’s been mean to you?”

Whoever it was, they’d better start praying that he didn’t find out; otherwise, centaur’s blood would be the least of their problems.

“You know who.” Ed chimed in, his face darkening slightly. “I told you.”

Luke quickly took back his words; the poor unclaimed kids had already endured enough suffering at his brother’s hands. However, if they started targeting younger children without apparent reason again, he would intervene—in a more humane manner than Edward’s methods, of course.

“And has it happened again?” He asked pointedly, disregarding the older demigod’s irritated expression.

“No.” Travis replied, taking the bottle back from the blonde. “After you became supreme leader again, nobody really bothered us anymore.”

Luke clasped his hands and declared, “In that case, there’s no need for these…pranks.” He extended his hand and said firmly, “Give me the bottles.”

Travis started to protest, opening his mouth, but was cut off by a knock on the cabin door. Since the campers from Cabin Eleven usually barged in without knocking, it had to be someone from the other cabins—and Luke had a pretty good idea who it might be.

Well, he had incited the man to come after all.

As Luke walked to the cabin entrance, he cast a warning glance over his shoulder, making it clear he was watching and that they shouldn’t even think about hiding the centaur blood behind his back. His little brothers scowled but reluctantly sat back down and resumed their game.

When the blonde opened the door, he was met with a frowning Ryan, whose eyes blazed with anger as soon as he saw the blonde demigod.

It was only to be expected, really.

“Good morning, Kendrick. To what do I owe this *delightful* surprise?” Luke asked pleasantly, only realizing he hadn’t quite masked the mocking glint in his eyes when he saw Ryan’s gaze narrow menacingly.

“Castellan.” He greeted with an irritated drawl. Clearly irked, he got straight to the point, “What’s this nonsense Annabeth is going on about, saying I’m ruining her chances? You’re willing to teach those barbarians from Cabin Five but refuse to help with my own?”

Nonchalantly, the blonde checked his nails as he replied, “Annabeth is a smart kid and would be a pleasure to train. However, I’m quite busy and don’t recall signing any contract or agreeing to the arrangement you set up. Curious, isn’t it? Quite reminiscent of Peter.” He glanced up at the other man’s gradually reddening face from beneath his lashes and added, speaking airily as if discussing the weather, “Besides, it wouldn’t be very tactful for me, as head counselor, to involve myself in the cause of my cabin’s civil war, would it?”

Ryan paused abruptly, his gray eyes flashing with a dangerous light as he slowly looked up, past Luke’s head, and directed his gaze into the cabin, locking onto something—or rather, someone.

Snorting disdainfully, he retorted without once breaking his fixed gaze, “Do you feel the same way about your brother, Castellan?”

“I do. However, he’s taking the necessary steps to redeem himself, both to me and to our cabin, while the same cannot be said for you.” Luke countered, straightening up in an attempt to block the other man’s gaze.

Unfortunately, Ryan was taller than the blonde, so his gaze remained firmly fixed inside.

“I see.” The son of Athena uttered, finally breaking his gaze to study the younger demigod with his steel-gray eyes, now unreadable as he pondered the situation. After a moment, he asked, his voice oddly cordial, “And what is it that I supposedly did, Castellan?”

Internally, Luke rolled his eyes.

Now that the older man was cornered, he would likely start making excuses to avoid real blame, even though he had practically confessed his involvement. But he begrudgingly admitted to himself that the vague mention of ‘making a few adjustments’ could mean anything and didn’t offer concrete evidence.

If only his brother were more willing to admit what exactly Ryan had done—both to him and to their cabin…

With an idea in mind, he leaned against the doorway, crossed his arms, and raised his eyebrows. Speaking with a calm demeanor, he slyly suggested, “Perhaps you should be

asking Edward. He experienced everything first-hand during those few days, after all."

The older man looked down at him with an expressionless face, then a slow, malicious smile spread across his features as he glanced up again and said, "Perhaps that *is* indeed the best course of action."

The noise of something hitting the ground behind him startled Luke, but Ryan's reaction was a subtle, almost amused glint in his eyes. With a suspicious glance at the man's too-composed behavior, the blonde stepped aside and motioned for him to come inside.

Guiding the son of Athena, who observed the interior of the cabin with a mix of curiosity and slight disgust, towards his oddly still older brother, Luke couldn't help but wonder what had actually happened between these two.

In the end, though, it was irrelevant.

When they reached the frozen man, who was as pale as a ghost, the blonde turned to his younger brothers and ordered, "You two, out. This is for grown-ups. You can't stay."

Making a face at the order but not protesting, they stood up and trudged toward the cabin's entrance, dragging their feet as if hoping to overhear something. With a sidelong glance at their deliberate pace, Luke stared at the ceiling and sighed before saying aloud, "Connor. The bottles stay here."

Huffing in frustration at being caught, his youngest brother returned with a vexed expression on his chubby face—which only succeeded in making him look cute. He shot Luke an irritated glare, pouted, and set the bottles back where they belonged before scurrying over to join Travis.

Only when the door was shut did the blonde turn to face the two older men.

With a frown, he observed the staring contest. The son of Athena fixed Ed with an unblinking, menacing gaze, his gray eyes seeming to promise pain, while Ed, despite his unease, stubbornly refused to look away.

Clearing his throat pointedly, which startled his brother into turning to face him and made the Cabin Six counselor slowly look away from Ed's profile, Luke crossed his arms and asked, "So, what did Ryan *supposedly* do, Edward?"

Clearly hesitant, his brother wetted his lips and stole another glance at the son of Athena before stiffly intoning, "I'm not quite sure."

"You heard him, Castellan." Ryan drawled, a smug smirk spreading across his face. "He's not sure."

*As if,* Luke scoffed internally.

It was obvious this clown had something hanging over his brother's head, and he didn't appreciate that *at all*. Ed might be an asshole, and they might have their petty misunderstandings and conflicts, but, in the end, they were still family.

Although that didn't mean he had forgiven, much less forgotten, the concussion Edward had given him.

"Indeed. That means he has some idea of what you did." He countered immediately, brushing off the dirty look from the other demigod for not accepting the vague answer. Turning to his brother, he urged, "You can tell me what you know, even if you're not *quite sure*. I'll listen anyway."

Looking a bit astonished by the support, Ed sneaked a look at Ryan's face, then furrowed his brows in thought before his expression settled into one of determination, tinged with quite a bit of anger. Before his courage could waver, he muttered, "He gave me the idea."

Unsurprising.

Luke sneakily watched as the son of Athena's demeanor briefly showed surprise before it was masked by a cordial expression, though it had a miffed edge beneath.

"And what kind of idea was it?" He asked, maintaining a neutral and light tone.

"To revoke their guest rights." Ed replied, gradually growing more confident. As if opening the doors of a dam, he continued with a hint of vindictiveness, clearly relieved to share and perhaps to reveal that he wasn't the only villain in this story after the whole spectacle had blown up in his face. "They had been acting disrespectfully toward us, their hosts, and it only got worse until they were being blatant about their intention to kick me out. You know this as well as I do, birdie, but that was a serious breach of *xenia*, and I had every right to retaliate."

Worst of all, Edward was correct.

By the rules of guest-friendship, the rioting by the unclaimed was seen as a violation of boundaries and respect. If this were the good old days of Ancient Greece, his brother would have been well within his rights to invoke the gods to punish such breaches of conduct, which would inevitably lead to severe consequences for the guests.

Luke only needed to recall that his father and Zeus had once flooded an entire village for the *sin* of refusing to offer them hospitality for the night.

But he seriously doubted that Edward followed all the rules to the letter either.

"Indeed." He agreed dryly. "But I like to think we're above such inelegant solutions."

Ed lowered his eyes, a look of shame crossing his face. "I acted without thinking at first." He admitted. "I wanted them to respect us, to respect me. We're the children of the Messenger, one of the Olympians. But it feels like none of that matters. It's almost as if this cabin isn't truly ours and we're just intruders in our own home."

Luke hummed thoughtfully, glancing at Ryan.

As the pieces fell into place, he realized that his brother's vulnerability had been exploited. Moreover, while he believed in the sincerity of the speech, he couldn't shake the feeling that

some of the words seemed to echo advice from someone else—a *certain,* very *specific* someone.

"I see." He uttered before turning to fully face the son of Athena. "And what do you have to say for yourself?"

Raising an eyebrow as if the entire situation were absurd and he were completely uninvolved—something Luke was not about to buy—Ryan said in a patronizing tone that never failed to make the blonde want to abandon civility, “I proposed a solution. If Edward didn’t understand what I meant, that’s his problem. I never told him to act with prejudice.”

What a joke. Who was he trying to fool? Bigotry might as well be the unofficial surname of the inhabitants of Cabin Six.

Before the younger demigod could say anything, Edward snapped, “Don’t try to pin all the blame on me. You were very clear about what I should and shouldn’t do, and you *insisted* that this was necessary to control my cabin.” He laughed derisively and added, “You said you’d know, being the son of the goddess of war.”

*Well, isn’t this fascinating,* Luke thought to himself as he crossed his arms and observed the exchange. He wasn’t about to miss the chance to see them turn on each other so openly and reveal the details he wanted to know—better yet, he didn’t even need to lift a finger.

It was the whole point of this little confrontation he had orchestrated, after all.

Tilting his head as if inspecting an unusually talkative insect, Ryan responded calmly, raising an eyebrow in a pompous manner, “And I *do* know. But perhaps the message was simply lost in translation.” He gave Ed a mocking once-over before continuing in a drawl, “Or maybe it’s just a matter of comprehension. Quite a shame, given that your father is the god of languages. I’m *sure* he’s very proud of you.”

A low blow, and it was clearly felt—his brother flinched and gritted his teeth so hard that Luke could hear them grinding against each other.

“Oh, yeah?” Ed hissed, suddenly standing up and moving into Ryan’s space, whose face closed off into an unreadable mask. “Then why did you, oh great *genius*, stop me when I tried to end this? Why did you thre—”

Abruptly, Ryan leaned forward until his nose nearly touched the other man’s and muttered in a low, menacing rumble, “Be careful with what you say, *Edward*.”

It seemed it was time to step in before things got any worse.

At any rate, Luke had already listened enough to realize that, despite the son of Athena's attempts to appear innocent, he was just as guilty, if not more so, than he had initially suspected.

Clapping his hands to break the tension and draw the attention of the two men—who remained poised for a fight—he remarked casually, “It seems you’ve *supposedly* caused quite

a bit of damage, Kendrick."

Ryan stepped back, putting some distance between himself and Edward. His gaze flashed with anger at the quip, then shifted to understanding, but soon a new glint appeared—one that looked awfully like respect.

"You're clever, Castellan." He admitted with a begrudging tone. "What do you want?"

With a slow smirk spreading across his face, Luke crossed his arms behind his back and said, "For the chaos you caused in my cabin and the way you coerced my brother, I'd say you owe me quite a lot, don't you agree?"

Ryan huffed, raising an eyebrow as he countered, "You seem to be conveniently forgetting that one of the reasons you're counselor again is due to my interference."

"Is it, though?" Luke retorted, suppressing a scoff at the man's arrogance. "If I recall correctly, it was my father who handed my position back to me, and that has nothing to do with all the mayhem you two caused."

Snapping his head toward his younger brother, Edward furrowed his brows in confusion, very clearly trying to make sense of the revelation.

Ryan, however, appeared to have already pieced it together, as he exhaled sharply and muttered irritably, "It seems I acted without all the facts."

*Yeah, you did, serpent of Eden.*

"In any case." Luke continued, avoiding any confirmation or denial—better to let them draw their own conclusions since he had no intention of admitting how tightly his father had him in his grasp. "I'm sure we can reach an understanding."

"Fine. You win." Ryan sighed, his gray eyes shifting from the dangerous blades they usually resembled to something more akin to Annabeth's polished silver.

Huh. It seemed that when this man lost, he became halfway tolerable—certainly less haughty.

"First, you owe Cabin Eleven reparations for the drama you caused." Luke said, raising two fingers. "Second, grant me access to your library, including your private collection."

Immediately, the other demigod scowled and protested, "You want me to let an *outsider* access our books?"

Luke raised an eyebrow, more cheekily than he intended, and retorted, "I get where you're coming from. I certainly didn't want an *outsider* meddling in my cabin's affairs either."

A slight redness began to creep onto Ryan's pale skin at the rebuke.

Really, the guy needed to reflect on his own actions and think twice—perhaps even thrice—before criticizing others, especially when he had done something undeniably worse himself.

Either way, Luke couldn't deny feeling a certain satisfaction at seeing the son of Athena so… humbled.

Deciding he had mocked Ryan enough, he cut to the chase and offered a concession to ease the man's ego in light of his demands.

"I'll train Annabeth—*just* Annabeth—in exchange."

The offer would be irresistible to the Cabin Six counselor, Luke knew. The fact that he was training the little hellions of Cabin Five, rather than any of the brain spawn, was incentive enough. Ryan clearly didn't appreciate being denied something his rivals had access to: extra training with the almost-but-not-quite swordsmanship instructor.

It was precisely why the older man had tried to force him to train Annabeth, but Luke wouldn't be so easily cornered—especially not by mortals.

Immortals, however, were a different beast altogether.

Ryan paused, stroking his chin thoughtfully as he considered the offer. Yet, the interested, almost avid gleam in his eyes was enough of an answer—Luke already guessed what the man would say before he even spoke.

"Acceptable." The son of Athena finally announced, extending his hand to seal the deal.

With a smug smile, Luke shook hands and then promptly declared, "Now that we're done here, I'll show you out."

Rolling his eyes, but not protesting and seemingly relieved to leave, Ryan turned around and slipped his hands into his pockets. As he did so, something fell out. Luke caught only a fleeting glimpse before the older man swiftly retrieved it and shoved it back into his pocket, acting as if nothing had happened.

It was a silver drachma, which was unusual given that most of the Greek coins they used were made of gold. However, it wasn't nearly notable enough to occupy much of his thoughts.

Sighing as he watched the son of Athena march back to his cabin, Luke leaned against the doorframe, contemplating the dumpster fire of a situation Ryan had ignited.

It was interesting, to say the least, that the other demigod believed he had been helping him, though he couldn't claim to understand the older man's reasons at all.

They weren't friends. Hell, they didn't even *like* each other.

The only explanation he could come up with that made a lick of sense was that the son of Athena had mentioned respecting him—and from someone so arrogant, that was high praise indeed.

It was almost like admitting Luke was his equal.

“You played him like a fiddle.”

Ed’s voice made Luke turn his head. His brother sat on the bed, arms crossed, a thoughtful frown on his face as he stared at Luke, as if seeing him for the first time.

“I had something he wanted, so it was quite simple.”

Snorting at the answer, Edward retorted, “No, it’s not simple. I can see why dad wanted you in charge, even if it meant making a deal for it.” Furrowing his brows, he asked, “It was a deal, wasn’t it? That’s the reason for the letter too.”

Pausing to study Ed, who met his gaze evenly, Luke sighed and admitted, “Yes, it was.”

He hadn’t actually expected his brother to guess it, but given that Edward was also a son of Hermes, it was no surprise he was familiar with their father’s…attitude, even if only a little.

“He gave you something, didn’t he?” His brother asked, his face showing a hint of concern. After a moment’s hesitation, he shook his head and then asked, “Can I see it?”

Luke analyzed his brother’s face for a long moment, weighing whether to trust him after everything that had happened—he still hadn’t forgiven him. But Edward seemed genuinely earnest and was clearly trying to make amends.

Besides, it was just a bracelet charm. If he didn’t reveal its true significance, his brother wouldn’t know what he actually owed to their father.

“Fine.” Luke sighed, pulling out the miniature caduceus from his pocket and presenting it to the older man.

Carefully, as if it might come to life and bite him, Edward took the charm in his hands. He narrowed his eyes, rolling it between his fingers and scrutinizing it closely.

It was almost amusing how delicately Edward handled the tiny caduceus, treating it like a priceless diamond when it was far from one. But then Luke recalled that it was a ‘gift’ from Hermes, representing his symbol, and, coupled with the memory of how their father had humiliated Ed, the amusement faded quickly.

“I think it’s pretty clear he wants you to wear this.” Ed commented, quickly handing the ornament back as if it had burned him.

Luke made a displeased face, causing Edward to look at him sternly, for once appearing like the older brother he was, and speak very seriously.

“Look, I don’t know what dad asked of you, nor do I want to. But do you want my advice?”

*Not particularly, no,* Luke thought, though it seemed his brother was going to offer it anyway.

"Just use it." Ed said, his tone serious. Running a hand through his hair, he added, "If he, somehow, sees you’re not wearing it, there’s a big chance he’ll get angry. And it’s always better to avoid angering the gods, especially when they’re not in a good mood."

It looked like the public spectacle had affected his brother more than he had initially realized. Edward appeared truly concerned about how their father might react and what it could mean to Luke, even though it was very clear the older man wanted no part in it.

Hermes had really managed to put Ed's tail between his legs, it seemed.

Belatedly, he caught onto the vague mention of their father's mood, which instantly halted and redirected his thoughts. With a puzzled expression, he echoed, "Not in a good mood?"

"Dad…dad didn't seem very happy that day, like he wasn't all there." Ed explained curtly, his demeanor suggesting he was uncomfortable with the topic.

*Strange*.

"I see. Well, I'll wear it then." Luke declared with finality, realizing he wouldn't get any more information from his brother given his current behavior. Moreover, he still had other important matters to address today. As he turned to leave, he paused and added over his shoulder, "And don't forget to find the Stolls. Babysitting them is still your responsibility."

Walking out of the door before Edward could have the chance to speak, Luke rolled the caduceus in his palm, hesitating for a split second before he halted and focused on getting this problem over with. As he quickly attached the charm to his bracelet, a black blur caught his eye.

Already feeling a deep sense of exasperation, he slowly turned his head and was met with his dog's large, pleading ruby eyes.

Ever since he awakened, Pipo had stalked him to the point where Lee and Katherine banned the dog from even approaching the Big House. Though he never got too close, he always lingered on the periphery, looking at Luke with such pathetic behavior that the demigod almost felt pity for him.

Almost, but not quite.

The hellhound still had to choose whom to follow after all: Luke or Hermes.

"What is it?" He asked, feeling a bit stupid for talking to a dog, though *this* one had already proven to be quite smart—way too smart, really.

Pipo sat down in front of him, lowering his head and flattening his ears against his skull—a clear sign of submission.

Narrowing his eyes, Luke stared at the dog, and the dog stared back.

After a brief moment of confusion, Pipo lowered his head even further until it touched the ground, and Luke finally understood what the hellhound was trying to communicate.

"So you decided it's me, huh?" He snorted, a hint of amusement in his voice as he watched the dog sit back up, ears perked and tail wagging slightly.

Happily barking, Pipo danced around him in response.

That was good, but he wouldn't trust the hellhound too much, not until he got comfortable with Pipo again—discovering that he had acted as his father's little spy had been quite a shock after all.

Despite his distrust, Luke had to admit he missed his furry friend.

As he patted the dog's head—Pipo's back leg thumping against the ground—a sudden surge of energy pulsed through him, seemingly out of nowhere. The dog's ears perked up, and Pipo pointed his snout at Luke's chest, like a bloodhound honing in on its prey. With his fur bristling, the hellhound let out a low growl, but the sound fizzled into a confused whine as the aura shrank back, becoming nearly undetectable again.

Well, that was interesting—and troubling.

Pipo's ability to detect aura or magic, or whatever this strange energy from his new world might be, was useful. However, the fact that Luke couldn't fully trust the hellhound not to reveal this *situation*—something he wanted to solve on his own—to someone else, *particularly* his father, was worrisome.

Kneeling in front of the dog, Luke lowered his voice to a whisper, careful not to be overheard by the nearby demigods—those little brats were notorious gossips, and he didn't want to take any chances. He spoke with the right amount of seriousness to make sure Pipo understood, "This stays between the two of us, okay? Our secret—*just ours*."

Whining slightly but recognizing that Luke wasn't going to change his mind, Pipo nudged his head against the demigod's chest, right where his heart was, and barked in succession a few times, lolling his tongue out and tilting his head.

Since he wasn't fluent in dog language, Luke chose to interpret that as compliance.

Rising to his feet, he brushed the dirt from his pants and walked toward his destination, with Pipo trailing behind, radiating an exuberance that had been missing the past few weeks.

Soon, he was before it—the brightest and most unnecessarily blinding of the twelve cabins: Cabin Seven.

Luke squinted, though it did little to alleviate the pain in his eyes, and knocked on the front door. In an effort to preserve his vision, he turned his back to the cabin, waiting for someone to answer while observing Pipo, who made a frustrated sound from a distance.

The hellhound's reaction could be because, as a creature of the Underworld, he was not exactly fond of excessive light—which was precisely the design choice of Cabin Seven.

Sun god, sun cabin. Quite tacky, if he was being honest.

In any case, the dog sneezed, barked, and then ran to stand guard by Cabin Eleven, a task he seemed to enjoy for no apparent reason.

Thankfully, Luke didn't have to wait long. The door opened, and a familiar voice greeted him, "Ah, little Luke, welcome. Lee's out playing volleyball right now."

Turning around with a squint to brave the light, he greeted the older woman as best he could, "Good morning, Latifa. That's not a problem; I'm actually here to look at some books, if you don't mind."

Chuckling warmly, she gave him an amused look—or at least that's what he thought, as he could barely see anything at all—and gently ushered him inside, saying, "It's quite bright, isn't it? I can hardly believe I wasn't bothered by it once."

Now inside and feeling much more comfortable, Luke glanced at the head counselor of Cabin Seven. Latifa looked much the same as she had a few years ago, though her curly hair was now unbraided and styled in an elegant high bun. Her amber eyes, however, held an uncharacteristic hint of sadness that he understood all too well—Aubrey's absence was still sharply felt.

"Well, I suppose not staying here year-round makes one unused to it."

She was in college now and was the only other demigod, besides Axel, who was an *actual* adult—old enough to drink if she chose to. However, Latifa was the most saintly person he knew in this place, so she avoided such things.

"Quite right." She answered as she guided him to the library section of her cabin. "But soon, I won't have to worry about such things anymore."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm not coming back after this summer." Latifa said breezily, as if such a world-shaking revelation were no big deal.

"What?" Luke exclaimed loudly, drawing irritated glances from nearby campers who were absorbed in their creative projects, or, well, had been before his outburst.

Of course, he was aware that adult campers—*if* they managed to survive to that age—would eventually leave.

Still, he was surprised.

"I'm tired, Luke." She sighed, her expression making her words painfully clear; her eyes were sunken and weary, and the sorrow from Aubrey's death still lingered—suddenly, he remembered that his sister and Latifa had been friends from the same demigod generation. "I want a normal life, or at least as normal as I can manage."

He couldn't blame her for that—it would be hypocritical, given that he wished for the same thing.

"I get you." Luke whispered, once again mulling over Mr. D's offer for what felt like the thousandth time.

With a sad yet comforting smile, Latifa placed a hand on his shoulder and reassured him, “It’s the way of things. One day, may the gods permit it, you too will leave Camp Half-Blood and live your life freely.”

He doubted it—the bracelet charm on his wrist suddenly felt heavier, almost like a chain—but he appreciated the attempt at consolation.

“And Axel?” Luke asked, almost dreading the answer, though part of him hoped the man would leave this place—he certainly deserved it.

“He’ll be coming with me.” She replied firmly, a determined look in her eyes that brought back a bit of their old brightness, making them resemble the lively suns they once were. “It will be good for him.”

It was a strange feeling, Luke had to admit. On one hand, he was glad Axel would get a chance to leave this place behind and truly live, perhaps even find some healing from his grief. On the other hand, Axel was the last piece of Aubrey he still had, and watching him go would feel awfully like losing his sister all over again.

Observing his expression with a trace of understanding, Latifa added with a gentle smile, “Don’t worry, Luke. We still have Iris Message, right? I promise we’ll stay in touch.”

He nodded silently, feeling a bit embarrassed at being treated like a child, even though it did manage to soothe him a little.

"Now, what books were you looking for?" She asked, smoothly changing the topic as she turned to one of the bookshelves and began running her fingers along the spines.

The reason he was here and why he had pressured Ryan into giving him access to Cabin Six’s books was straightforward: he needed to learn more about the Romans; but, clearly, he couldn’t give that answer to Latifa.

In any case, his reasoning for coming to Cabin Seven for that kind of information, after his utter failure to find anything about the Fates, was that, since Apollo was the only Greek deity he was pretty sure had no Roman equivalent, there might be a book on the subject or even a passing mention of the other pantheon somewhere—it was a shot in the dark, but it was the only idea he could come up with.

If he wanted to get rid of the thing in his chest, he needed to identify which god had placed it there in the first place.

“Is there anything on notable children of the Far-Shooting?” Luke asked, thinking quickly. “I’ve heard that influential people in the past sometimes claimed to be related to the gods, but I always thought it was…you know.”

He rubbed the side of his neck with a sheepish air, sneaking a glance at the other demigod from beneath his lashes.

"You thought it was all talk.” She concluded with a hint of amusement. Gesturing for him to follow, she led him to a smaller, less noticeable bookshelf set a bit apart from the others. She paused in front of it, running her finger along the titles until she stopped on one and let out a small sound of triumph, pulling it from the shelf. "You wouldn’t be wrong—many claims were just a way for the powerful to gain influence. But some had a sliver of truth in them. Here."

Accepting the book, Luke glanced at its cover and struggled to mask his reaction when he saw the title: *Imperial Sun: The Great God Apollo and Rome’s Emperors.*

It was exactly what he needed.

“I have a feeling you’ll make great use of it.” Latifa said pleasantly. A vague look crossed her face before she snapped out of it and smiled warmly. “It’s a great one—mostly about my father and his descendants, hence the name—but it also includes accounts of other gods, along with little tidbits about the time period and such. A very interesting read.”

"If you approve of it, then it must be good.” He remarked with conviction.

*Holy shit*. Luke could hardly believe his luck was finally turning around after all the pain he had faced.

“Aren’t you charming?” She giggled, her eyes crinkling at the corners. “In any case, feel free to use any of our armchairs. Enjoy your reading!”

With that, Latifa returned to whatever she had been doing before his arrival, leaving Luke alone with his thoughts.

Sitting in one of the armchairs near the bookshelves—he was so envious that they had all of this while Cabin Eleven barely had space for bedrolls—he made himself comfortable and cracked open the book.

It was actually interesting—and, more relevant to his current problem, informative.

The sections about the children and other descendants of the gods were engaging, but he had skimmed through them until he reached a part he found truly pertinent.

It was a brief mention, almost unnoticeable, but it spoke of how the Romans were so *insufferably* pragmatic and how Apollo’s, in his own words, fellow gods were all *terribly* methodical.

*Pragmatic*, Luke mused to himself, absentmindedly rubbing his chest.

He searched for more mentions of the other gods besides Apollo, though it was difficult since the book focused primarily on him, and such allusions were scarce. But from what he could tell, the Greek seemed to be an odd fit among the Roman pantheon.

It was a shame there weren’t more details, but at least he’d learned something.

Closing the book, Luke set it back on the shelf and gave Latifa a brief wave before leaving. Deep in thought, he wandered aimlessly as he mulled over his findings.

Which god had Luke encountered? The deity was male, which narrowed the possibilities, but not by much.

And he still had so little information...

Choosing to settle under a nearby tree, Luke brooded for a while before a terrible, absolutely stupid idea struck him.

But he was tempted to try.

Closing his eyes and placing one hand on his chest, right above his heart, he concentrated.

At first, nothing seemed to happen, and he felt awkwardly like some kind of monk in deep contemplation. But gradually, the world began to lose focus, and his attention turned inward, as if he were slipping into a trance.

He became hyperaware of the aura inside him.

Though it remained still and well-behaved, not doing much, he couldn't ignore its presence like before.

It was *foreign*.

Making a split-second decision, Luke cautiously narrowed his focus on the aura, intent on analyzing it.

It lasted less than a minute, but two things happened in quick succession: he somehow managed to poke the aura—he wasn't sure how, but he *felt* it—the thing reacted and eagerly did the same; however, it latched on and wouldn't let go.

The sensation was…strange, but thankfully neither painful nor unpleasant.

It was smooth, reminiscent of high-end silk but not quite the same. Hard to describe, it felt soft and inviting, with a sense of being drawn in, almost urging him to trust it. Yet, there was an underlying impression of hoarding that made the hair on his neck stand on end. Still, it felt different from that day—less focused, perhaps? Maybe more instinctive?

But just as he felt on the verge of figuring something out, the aura abruptly withdrew.

Then, the world snapped back into focus.

Luke opened his eyes, feeling almost put out by it, even as a wave of relief washed over him. What he'd done was uncharacteristically reckless, yes, but it had also proved to be quite illuminating.

It seemed his hypersensitivity was useful for *something* after all.

Chapter End Notes

The patron god thing is good on the surface. On paper, it's advantageous; Hermes will help and offer things the other demigods do not have access to, and what Luke has to do is pretty minor (honor his father and so on), so it can be quantified as a minor favor. But here's where the loophole starts: Hermes can demand whatever he likes—yeah, this man is tricky and smart.

Then, Ryan's grand plan: the man was playing puppet master with Edward until Ed decided to rebel, which didn't work out. And, yeah, Ryan is trying to wiggle out of the situation he caused, letting all the blame fall on poor Ed while being 100% convinced he was the one who got Luke his position back. But in the end, both are at fault for escalating something that was already on the precipice. The situation was BAD; I feel that after the quest, the unclaimed became more confident and respected in camp because two of their number succeeded in one of Hercules' labors (and I think it had repercussions on the gods' side too, which is why Kat was claimed), result: all hell breaks loose.

And finally, Pipo the Dangerous is now partly back in Luke's good graces. I feel like the road to forgiveness and trustworthiness is still long.

Summer is ending—which will happen next chapter—and the older demigods will leave, which will be sad for Luke. On the flip side, he found something about the Romans—very little, but still useful. About Apollo not having a counterpart: he is the quintessential god of Greek civilization, with most of his domains related to things the Greeks found important. So, basically, the Romans didn't have a god that fit into his niche to meld them together, so they just adopted him. This is quite funny since, in the books, it's said Athena was the most Greek of the Greek gods, but, in truth, it's actually Apollo.

In any case, thanks for reading! Comments are always appreciated! I love reading your thoughts, theories, and so on, and it doesn't matter if you're late to the party!

What do you guys think Hermes' plan with the patronage thing is all about?

# Chapter 27: Teenhood - Summer's end

Chapter Summary

Time to say goodbye

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Luke sat on his bed, watching the other demigods flit around the cabin like a swarm of bees.

It was the end of summer, and many of the demigods would soon return to their mortal homes. It always left him with a strange feeling, like he was trapped in a prison while his fellow inmates had served their time and were now free to go, see their families, and reintegrate into society.

In his mind, it wasn't a far-off comparison.

As he cast a sulky sideways glance at Axel, he thought that this time, the sensation was even worse.

Almost all of his friends were leaving, and while he knew, intellectually, that this time had been inevitably coming—they weren't getting any younger and, miraculously, had survived this long—he couldn't say he was all that happy about it.

It made him feel a bit lonely and sad, too. He had already lost two people forever, and while this situation was completely different, it had an unsettlingly familiar ache to it.

Which was absurd. He would see them all again eventually, since he wouldn't be a teen forever, much less *grounded*. One day, if the Lord permitted it—and if he could outsmart the Fates—he would leave Camp Half-Blood and live freely, just as Latifa had told him.

However, emotions rarely, if ever, made sense.

"Tiny bird." Axel's voice pulled him from his thoughts—but not from his mood.

Luke turned his head slowly and deliberately toward the older man, raising an eyebrow. With a petulant air, he corrected, "Not tiny. I'm not a little kid anymore."

Axel studied him in puzzled silence for a moment before making a noise in the back of his throat, as if he had figured something out. Then, he declared, as if it were the answer to all the problems of the universe, "The grumpy, bratty teen phase, I see."

Scowling, Luke retorted, “I’ll have you know that I’m the cabin counselor, and that’s a disrespect to my person and position.”

Him? A grumpy teenager? Preposterous. He was an *adult*.

“I see.” Axel repeated blandly, returning to tidy up his things. He didn’t have much—just the essentials, a few self-made carvings, and some photos. With a melancholic expression, he lingered over the pictures before carefully packing them into his bag.

Luke couldn’t blame him; he had struggled to look away from his sister’s photos too.

He missed her so much—he wondered what she would have done in his place, what advice she would give him. But she was gone, and he was the counselor.

There was no more to it.

“I will keep in touch with you.” Axel said, still packing his belongings without looking up. When he finally turned to face Luke, he added solemnly, “I promise.”

Swallowing heavily at the earnestness, Luke took a moment to study Axel’s face. The older man’s ice-blue eyes still carried a heavy, pained look, but there was more light in them now. They seemed less lost and, above all, genuinely sincere.

“I’ll hold you to that.” Luke retorted after a moment of hesitation. Unsure of what else to say, he, very lamely, left it at that.

Feeling a bit awkward, he shifted his gaze to the other demigods scurrying about, chatting with friends they wouldn’t see again until next summer, and busily packing their things or checking them for the thousandth time.

It wasn’t surprising at all that they were being so meticulous—if they forgot something, there was no chance to retrieve it; the cleaning harpies had permission to eat them.

Even the demigods who stayed at Camp Half-Blood year-round had to avoid the harpies while the monsters cleaned the cabins at summer's end, or they risked being attacked by the fat, half-pigeon creatures. Admittedly, this was less of a threat to the older campers—they were stronger and had faced far more dangerous monsters than three slow, stupid bird-women—but it worked well enough to keep the younger ones in line, or at least nearly so.

The cleaning harpies were also responsible for enforcing curfew, but that didn’t seem to stop Travis and Connor from breaking it whenever they wanted, often giving Luke a heart attack when he noticed they had vanished from the cabin. They were so small—only seven and six—that the monsters could easily snatch them up.

Luke knew this well; he had almost been snatched when he was a youngling himself. Though it wasn’t the nearly domesticated and lazy creatures of Camp, but a truly feral one that had nearly gutted him.

Even though Luke still felt anxious with his younger brothers’ antics, he was fairly certain that Mr. D would never actually allow the harpies to carry out their threats. It would be

counterproductive since the god's job was to keep the demigods as safe as they could be inside Camp.

In all honesty, Luke suspected that the threats were more of a scare tactic to keep everyone in line and give the director less of a headache. After all, these harpies were hounds of Zeus, and if they were here, it was because the King had commanded it.

Lost in thought, he fidgeted with the newest bead on his necklace as he kept watching his cabin-mates, Axel sitting quietly on the ground beside him. The older man's bedroll had already been returned to Cabin Eleven's supplies, where it would stay until another poor, unclaimed soul came along next year—and Luke was already dreading the job of explaining to the new kid why they'd have to sleep on the cold, hard ground.

Eventually, Luke's gaze settled on the other side of the cabin, where Katherine was tidying her belongings with single-minded focus. She folded her clothes with near-masterly precision and organized her things with a meticulousness that he, clearly, was too ignorant to understand.

When she was finally done, she huffed with a hint of satisfaction, picked up her bag, and slung it over her shoulders. Then, catching sight of him, she started to move in his direction.

"Luke, Axel." Kat acknowledged calmly as she approached.

Returning the greeting, Luke was a bit surprised to see that his friend had swapped her Camp shirt for regular clothes, which made her look like a typical mortal young woman, something she normally didn't bother with. Despite the change, her bead necklace stayed on, and he couldn't help but focus on it.

Noticing the direction of his gaze, Katherine lightly touched her necklace, her fingers brushing against the newest addition—the same one Luke and every other camper also had. It was a deep hue, either reminiscent of a sunset or a blood-soaked field, depending on who he asked. The bead also featured Thalia's pine tree prominently in the center, a lightning bolt above it, and a golden apple at the base—all marking the most memorable events of this summer.

"I still think you should have chosen another color." She declared, pulling the bead forward to examine it with a displeased expression.

"It was difficult enough agreeing on which event to paint; I wasn't about to argue over the color too." Luke replied, a touch of exasperation in his voice.

At the end of every summer, they, the head counselors of the cabins, gathered to vote on the most memorable occasion of the year to be painted on a new bead. This year, unlike many others, had been tumultuous, to say the least, and not a single counselor could agree on which event to choose.

In the end, they decided to compromise and include the two most significant events: Thalia's pine tree, due to her status as Zeus' daughter and the horde affair, and the golden apple,

because Luke and his friends' achievement was monumental—mirroring Heracles' labor, the quintessential Greek heroic quest, and incredibly difficult to replicate.

Personally, Luke believed it was important to honor the dead.

Thalia had sacrificed herself, and her tree had strengthened the Camp's barriers—her sacrifice deserved recognition, as they all owed her this added layer of safety. As for the golden apple…Levi was Luke's friend, and even in death, he would always be remembered as such.

His sacrifice would never be forgotten; the bead just made that memory all the more palpable.

"I think it's good." Axel chimed in, gazing at his own necklace with a melancholic gleam in his eye.

Raising her eyebrows, Katherine glanced sideways at the older demigod, clicked her tongue, and said reluctantly, clearly not wanting to risk making him even gloomier, "I suppose it will have to do. At least it's a memorable last bead."

Furrowing his brows, Luke turned sharply toward Kat and repeated pointedly, "Last bead?"

"I'm going back home. For real." She clarified, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

But it wasn't obvious *at all*.

Damn Katherine and her habit of withholding information about her own life. Now, Luke felt as if he'd been hit over the head with a hammer by the realization that he would be the only one of his friend group, besides Lee, who would stay at Camp.

And it made him angry—angry and sad, but mostly just angry.

"What the hell, Katherine? And you didn't think to tell me?"

"You didn't ask." She said serenely, looking at him as if he were the one being unreasonable.

He had to restrain himself from pulling out his hair at her answer. Why on earth would he have thought to ask such a question when she wasn't even old enough to go to college?

Admittedly, Kat was nearing the age when she would start needing to worry about these sort of things and perhaps begin preparing.

But that was beside the point.

Taking a deep breath to calm himself, Luke clasped his hands and asked slowly, "*Why* are you leaving?"

For a moment, Katherine just stared at him, her face strangely expressionless. Then she sighed and gestured for him to move over so she could sit beside him on the bed. Once

seated, she explained, “I’m older now; monsters think twice before attacking me, and I’m the child of a minor goddess—my smell is weak. The outside world isn’t as dangerous to me anymore, and I don’t like this place.” Glancing at him, she added suggestively, “And I think you understand exactly why.”

Luke understood it very well. He knew exactly what she disliked because he shared those same opinions, making it easy for him to recognize when others felt the same way.

Fidgeting with his necklace, he replied reluctantly, “I get why you want to leave, but you’re still young, Kat. Why not wait a bit longer?”

“Grief.” Axel interjected, his ice-blue eyes shifting between them with a knowing look. He then focused on the woman and added, “Trying to escape the pain.”

Suddenly, Katherine’s expression hardened as she locked eyes with the older demigod, who returned her gaze with a neutral, entirely mild demeanor.

After a tense moment of staring, she huffed and abruptly averted her gaze, her mouth curling downward as she declared, “I’ll leave and won’t come back. I’m done with this.”

Glancing at her from the corner of his eye, Luke felt his heart tighten at her determined expression. He clenched his hands into his shirt and hesitated before asking, “Will you…keep in touch?”

He couldn’t stop her from leaving, nor did he want to. He wouldn’t restrict someone’s freedom when his own was so limited.

Katherine turned back to face him, her dark eyes studying him before settling on his clenched hands. Gently, she pried his fingers from his shirt, met his gaze, and promised softly, “I will.” Leaning back, she pulled a piece of paper from her bag, scribbled something on it, and handed it to him. “Here.”

Taking the paper into his hands, Luke read it and then looked up, staring at her in surprise.

“You’re trusting me with this?”

Katherine had scribbled her address and home phone number on it, a significant gesture from someone as private as she was.

Luke felt incredibly touched.

“You’re my friend.” She answered simply. “You can Iris Message me too, but not *too* often. I don’t like video calls that much.”

Smiling faintly, he folded the paper carefully and tucked it into his pocket.

Then, nervously wetting his lips, he decided to return the gesture—surprisingly, he didn’t mind Axel’s presence and even found it somewhat reassuring. He whispered softly and quickly before he could second-guess himself, just loud enough for them to hear, “I haven’t

told anyone this, but I'm seeing my grandma today for the first time since I was barely more than a toddler. And…I'm a bit nervous about it."

"That's actually a good thing." Kat said after a pause, her brief surprise at Luke's openness evident—probably because he was as cagey as she was—before she quickly composed herself. "Having someone outside this place. A normal, mortal someone."

"Yeah, but what if she doesn't like me?" Luke asked, his voice tense as his mind raced with the intrusive thoughts that had plagued him ever since he accepted Mr. D's offer to see his grandmother.

"No need to worry." Axel interrupted, looking up at him with a serious expression.

Nodding firmly, Katherine added, "She's your family, and she seemed to like you well enough in that family picture. I don't think she'll be unhappy to see you."

"I hope so." Luke said.

He craved this family connection, this link to the normal world, and the fleeting sense of normalcy it offered. He longed for a taste of what a normal life was like, a glimpse of the past he couldn't reclaim here. He missed the simplicity of existing without the constant fear of being hunted, the ease of living like ordinary people, and most of all, he missed a time when gods didn't interfere with his life.

Lightly, he brushed his fingers over the bracelet on his wrist, the caduceus charm feeling heavy against his skin.

Luke *had* to honor Hermes; his father simply took it upon himself to make sure it happened.

"It will be fine." Katherine reassured firmly. Turning to him with a small smile, she added, "Who knows? Maybe you'll end up living with her someday."

That would be wonderful, though difficult to achieve. Yet, he desired it more deeply than he had ever wanted anything in this life.

"It would be nice." Luke confessed softly, picturing the scenario in his mind.

Kat studied his face for a moment before continuing with a feigned casualness, "While you're there, make sure to memorize the address and let me know. I'd like to visit sometime."

"Me too." Axel chimed in.

Feeling more reassured by his friends' confidence, Luke let out a small snort and said, "I don't even know if I'll end up living with her, and you're already planning to visit." He added with a touch of mischief, "Trying to win over my grandma, are you?"

"Grandmothers make the best food." Axel declared with utmost seriousness, nodding as he spoke.

Amused, Luke was poised to retort with a witty comeback when the door swung open with a loud bang, making every demigod jump and turn toward the entrance.

The newcomer was Ed, with the Stoll brothers trailing behind, struggling to match his pace as they headed straight for his bed. His older brother pointedly ignored the scowls and disapproving glares from the other demigods—especially the unclaimed, who were, very understandably, particularly hostile toward him.

But they wouldn't do anything.

Luke had made it very clear when he returned and resumed his duties that he didn't want to see or hear about any petty revenge related to the events during his coma, whether from one group or another. The disagreements had been resolved, and as he told them, he was the counselor now—that was the end of it.

It seemed to have worked well enough, as things were as peaceful as they could be in Cabin Eleven.

Luke watched as Edward settled onto the bed, shooing Travis and Connor away. The two brats scampered off as soon as they were dismissed—they clearly hated this whole babysitting arrangement. Edward's face was set in an unfriendly frown as he scanned the cabin before finally turning his attention to Luke. After a series of complicated expressions, he laid down on his sheets, turning his back to the room in a sulky manner.

Furrowing his brows, Luke exchanged looks with his two friends.

"What's wrong with him?"

With clear disinterest, Katherine shrugged, while Axel craned his neck to glance at Ed's back, then turned to face him again and suggested blandly, "Talk to him."

Well, It seemed nobody else was particularly interested in addressing his brother's troubles—except for him, of course.

Rising from his seat, he approached Edward's bed and poked his brother's back with a single finger, causing the older man to flinch and turn toward him with a scowl.

"What do you want?" His brother grumbled, sounding very much like a brat if Luke was being honest.

The man was nineteen, yet here he was, acting like he was the Stolls' age. Perhaps it was the time he spent with them, but if that was the case, Luke couldn't think very highly of his brother's character for being so easily influenced by kids more than ten years younger than he was.

"What crawled up your pants and died?" Luke shot back, raising an eyebrow and crossing his arms in an unimpressed gesture.

"I'm acting normal."

*No, he wasn't, not at all.*

"Then what's making you act so…*normally*?" Luke asked, knowing that debating whether Edward was behaving oddly or not was pointless—the man was too stubborn.

Clearly annoyed, Ed shot him a glare and sat up, rubbing his face as he glanced around at the other demigods packing up to leave, his expression growing a bit uncertain.

"I'm nineteen." Ed declared abruptly, making Luke wonder why he was stating the obvious. Pressing his lips together, his brother hesitated before continuing in a low voice, just loud enough for Luke to hear, "The others are leaving. All of them. And you're the counselor."

*Ah*, he suddenly understood what the problem was.

"I'm not kicking you out." He said, furrowing his brows as he glanced at his brother.

What was this man thinking? Luke wasn't heartless.

"I know, it's just…" Ed muttered, glancing at Axel and Katherine before looking down and clasping his hands in his lap. "It's just that I'm getting old, and it's expected for me to leave, especially since I'm not the counselor anymore."

That was true to some extent.

There was no rule requiring demigods to leave upon reaching adulthood, nor was there any prohibition against adults at Camp Half-Blood. On the contrary, Camp was open to all Greek demigods, regardless of age.

The problem was that it was designed with children in mind, as a summer camp, and there was an expectation that they would eventually reintegrate into mortal society—*if* they survived that long.

In those moments, Luke found himself wondering for the umpteenth time why they didn't just build a city like Camp Jupiter. If they did, demigods could choose to stay or leave, and there would at least be one place where they could live without constantly worrying about monsters—a safe haven.

"Do you want to leave?" Luke asked, his tone neutral, after a moment of silence.

Ed pressed his lips together, his face etched with deep uncertainty, appearing extremely conflicted. After a moment, he spoke, his voice carrying a note of raw vulnerability, "I don't have anywhere else to go."

Startled, Luke studied the older man for a few seconds, taking note of his tense demeanor. Deciding not to press the issue further, he cleared his throat and, with a hint of awkwardness, said, "If you want to stay, then stay. But *if* you decide to leave, I'm sure Chiron can help you with that."

Sighing, Ed rubbed his temples and cast a fleeting glance at the caduceus charm on Luke's wrist, his expression unreadable. He then looked up and met the younger demigod's gaze.

“I think I’ll go talk to him.” He abruptly announced. Standing up, he hesitated before adding sheepishly, “Thanks for…you know.”

Faster than Luke could react, the older man left the cabin, with the other campers around him ignoring his departure. Even Barry and Chase—Edward’s closest brothers and prank partners—watched him with conflicted expressions but ultimately did not follow.

To do so would have meant becoming a pariah.

Even so, despite everything his older brother had done, it was sad to see how isolated he was from everyone else.

*Maybe,* Luke thought, *that was one of the reasons Ed didn’t want to stay at Camp.*

His musings were interrupted by a sudden, loud horn blaring from outside.

Prompted by the sound, the demigods scrambled, quickly double-checking their belongings and forming a line. Luke hurried over to join his friends, weaving through the crowd as they made their way outside.

As he followed behind Axel and Katherine, navigating through the crowd of demigods scrambling in all directions to say their last goodbyes to their friends, Luke spotted Peter trying to soothe a furious Clarisse. It was an interesting scene, considering Peter was the only person here who seemed to garner any genuine admiration from her—a hero-complex, if Luke was being honest.

Feeling curious, he tapped his friends’ arms to signal them before slipping away and heading toward the children of Ares.

“Hello, Peter, Clarisse.” Luke greeted, then glanced at Peter’s overstuffed bag and added, “Or rather, goodbye, I guess.”

“I’m heading back home for school.” The older man explained when he noticed Luke’s raised brows. Still, Peter’s face was scrunched in evident displeasure at the thought of leaving.

As soon as the older man said that, Clarisse's brows furrowed further, her scowl deepening into an even angrier expression as distress flickered beneath her fierceness.

“Your home is here!” She snapped.

Sighing with the weariness of someone who’d had this conversation far too many times, Peter retorted, “It is. But I have to listen to my mother’s demands.”

“You shouldn’t! You said she beats you up!” Clarisse shot back, her face reddening with anger, though her concern was evident beneath her fury.

“Beat you up…?” Luke asked, raising an eyebrow as he examined the other man from head to toe.

Wu was enormous and a demigod son of Ares, which meant he was quite gifted in the strength department. Luke found it hard to imagine anyone else managing to actually give him a thrashing.

“Yes.” Peter answered with a straight face. “My mother was a boxing champion when she was young. When she’s upset or we need to resolve something, we settle it in the ring.”

That was definitely an…interesting way to settle their disagreements. It was no surprise that Ms. Wu matched Peter’s level of craziness; she was probably the root of it. After all, she must have something extraordinary about her to had caught Ares’ attention in the first place.

“I see…” Luke replied, not really knowing what else to say in the face of that statement.

Suddenly, Clarisse approached and grabbed his shirt, looking up at him with a fierce, demanding expression. “Tell him! Tell him he can’t go back to that place!”

It was odd to see her so distressed, but with her face puffed up and directed at him, he made a half-hearted attempt to mediate the situation between the siblings.

“Now, that doesn’t mean Peter can’t visit or come by during the summers.”

Looking deeply betrayed by his refusal to follow her plan to keep Peter from leaving, Clarisse glared at him before turning sharply toward her brother. She marched over and kicked Wu violently in the shin, but he didn’t react—Luke doubted he even felt it.

“I’ll return.” Peter said firmly, his jaw set in a stubborn tilt. “Fighting monsters gets dull after a while.”

“Do you promise?” Clarisse demanded, her lips set in a pout, though her eyes remained uncertain.

“I do.” The older man said with a nod. He then faced her directly and added, “And you promise you won’t slack off on your training?”

Clarisse bobbed her head in agreement, her anger fading now that she knew her brother would be returning occasionally, but she still wore a frown. With a hint of uncertainty, she muttered, “Do you promise that if things get bad, you’ll come back?”

Peter furrowed his brows, seeming confused by the question, but he nodded nonetheless.

Awkwardly observing the interaction, Luke couldn’t shake the uncomfortable feeling that he was intruding on something he shouldn’t be.

Clearing his throat, he quickly interjected as he got ready to leave, “Well, goodbye, Peter. I hope to see you again soon and all that.”

Without giving them a chance to react—Clarisse's annoyance obvious at his interruption—Luke waved to them both and walked away.

He wasn’t running away, *obviously*, just letting the siblings sort out their issues on their own.

As he wandered around searching for his friends, he caught sight of Pipo prancing over to join him out of the corner of his eye. Without turning his head but offering a brief pat of acknowledgment, he continued his stroll leisurely, carefully steering clear of the Aphrodite kids gossiping in a circle near the center of the space.

With one absentminded eye on the crowd, Luke's thoughts drifted to the Ares siblings.

Despite Clarisse's progress since her arrival—becoming more comfortable with others and even showing a hint of liking him, which felt almost like a sign of respect compared to her usual demeanor—her current behavior seemed like a step backward.

This regression gave him some insight into why she acted this way, and he didn't like the implications one bit.

Shaking off those unpleasant thoughts, reminding himself that Clarisse was a year-rounder and wouldn't be leaving the nest anytime soon, Luke resumed his search and soon spotted another troubled child: Annabeth.

She was sitting near her cabin—a gray building with an owl carved above the doorway and Greek columns lending it an air of simple elegance—hugging her legs to her chest as she gazed at the mingling demigods with a despondent expression.

Immediately, Luke changed direction to approach her.

Just as he was almost there, Pipo rushed forward and collided with the girl, licking her face as she shrieked and tried to push his snout away. Despite her protests, she was giggling a bit—a marked improvement.

*Good dog,* he thought to himself, while outwardly he pulled the hellhound away from his victim.

"Sorry about that. He's been a bit excitable lately."

"It's fine." Annabeth brushed it off, leaning forward to scratch Pipo's neck. While the dog's intervention had lifted her spirits somewhat, a hint of sadness still clung to her demeanor.

With a hum, Luke sat down beside her, watching the people mingling around. Some broke off to head toward the barriers, likely waiting for Argus to appear and transport them to New York. Once there, the vast majority would reunite with family and return home.

He waited for a bit, but unlike all the other times he had used this strategy, Annabeth remained quiet. Looking at her, Luke chose to break the silence and asked gently, "Is there a reason you're here rather than spending time with your friends?"

Making a face, she buried her head in Pipo's fur, her words coming out mumbled, though Luke managed to catch them, "I don't have any of those."

"Clarisse is your friend." Luke corrected blandly, already bracing himself for the inevitable outburst.

“She’s not my friend!” Annabeth immediately protested, pulling her face away from the dog with a scowl, her cheeks puffed adorably. Then, as if trying to hammer a lesson into a particularly obtuse student‘s head, she pointedly added, “She’s my *rival*. Besides, *she’s* staying, so we’ll be fighting tomorrow.”

Raising his eyebrows and noting the emphasis she placed on Clarisse staying, Luke remarked, “I see. She’s the one who’s staying.”

Annabeth nodded with vigor, then grumbled, “Unlike *certain* people…”

That was a lot of vitriol from a brat of seven years of age.

Suppressing a chuckle, which made Annabeth look at him with a puzzled expression, Luke rested his elbows on his knees and asked, “Which certain people?” Trying to coax a smile from her, he exaggerated a hurt expression, placing a hand over his heart as he teased, “It can’t be me, Annie! I’m staying.”

“It’s not you, silly.” She retorted, looking at him as if he were stupid—which was quite rude. Pouting, she added in a huffy tone, “It’s *Ryan*.”

“Ah.” He intoned as he connected the dots in his mind.

Her current behavior made sense. Although Luke struggled to understand it, Annabeth clearly *liked* her older brother. Part of this…admiration came from Ryan’s role as one of the demigods that participated in the horde affair, while the rest was due to the fact that he treated her well and taught her ‘fun’ things—for an Athena kid, that is.

But Luke couldn’t help but hope she would outgrow this admiration before she began mimicking that clown’s behavior.

“He refuses to tell me where he’s going!” She exclaimed, her frown deepening. Turning to Luke, she asked with a pleading look in her big gray eyes, “Did he say anything to you?”

In the past few weeks, after persuading Ryan to reluctantly grant him access to Cabin Six’s library, Luke had devoted all his free time to studying every book he could find about the Romans. Unfortunately, these books were rare and not very flattering, often skewing towards the Greek viewpoint, unlike the more balanced perspectives from Cabin Seven’s accounts. To make things worse, Ryan insisted on keeping watch—to prevent damage or theft, the older man had said—resulting in more time spent together than Luke would have liked.

Perhaps that was why Annabeth thought he might know her brother’s destination.

“Not really.”

Her expression dropped at his response, and she redirected her focus to Pipo, who had nestled his head in her lap and was blinking up at her with a cute, dopey look.

Luke rubbed his chin, letting out a sigh. “I don’t know why he’s being so secretive. But you do have friends here.” He remarked, gently tousling her hair. “You’re not alone.”

Nodding slightly, Annabeth seemed less distraught after his reassurance. Still, Luke knew her abandonment issues wouldn't be resolved overnight.

"Well." He stated, standing up and motioning for the sleepy dog on her lap to do the same. "Why don't you go find Clarisse? Winning a duel might help you feel better."

Of course, he wouldn't say it was because he thought the two had similar issues and could benefit from spending time together—Annabeth's pride would likely make her do the opposite if he mentioned that.

"Win. I can win." She stood up with a determined glint in her eye, giving him a distracted wave as she marched off.

*Sometimes, it is so easy to trick her,* Luke thought, watching her walk away with amusement bubbling inside him. Shaking his head in exasperation, a smile playing on his lips, he gestured for Pipo to follow.

It was time to find Mr. D.

As always, the aura within him pulsed subtly in response to his mood—a sensation he knew he would never fully get used to, though it was becoming easier to ignore. It seemed, however, that his dog found it more difficult to do so, as he growled until Luke placed a hand on his head.

Brushing aside Pipo's whining, Luke pondered about the energy.

He had learned a few things about it over the past few weeks, mainly because he stubbornly continued to test his luck by poking it—something he still didn't fully understand how he managed but might one day, given how often he kept doing it.

The aura was elusive; its intensity seemed to lessen and its nature shifted to become nearly undetectable in Dionysus' presence. Also, he found it had a constantly flowing, busy quality, even when still. Most notably, it appeared to be reactive rather than truly aware.

Luke theorized that it might be a part of the god—perhaps something like a puppet or a machine with predetermined functions.

But that was just speculation.

Soon, he found himself standing before the doors of the Big House.

Placing a hand on Pipo's neck and taking a deep breath to steady his nerves, Luke stepped into the building, leaving the dog behind. Inside, he found the god already waiting for him.

"Now, Lucy, you've said your goodbyes to your little friends?" Mr. D drawled, raising an eyebrow. When Luke nodded, the deity stood and said, "Then let's get this over with."

As Uncle D approached, his aura wrapping around them both, Luke suddenly recalled that his father had forbidden him from leaving Camp.

This small, *tiny* detail had slipped his mind amid the post-quest chaos. And, well, Mr. D didn't seem to care about his father's wishes either—Luke was sure the god had some idea of what Hermes had done; his reaction to when he had first seen the bracelet charm had been telling.

*Hermes isn't the boss of me,* he thought uncharitably, closing his eyes as the sensation became overwhelming, *and he won't find out about this anyway.*

When he opened his eyes again, still feeling as if the world was spinning, Luke found himself on a typical-looking street lined with nearly identical houses, though he had to admit the colors were quite vibrant and lively. The vibrant impression was raised even further by a few palm trees scattered along the sidewalk, adding a beachy vibe to the area.

As he took in his surroundings, Mr. D suddenly started walking toward one of the buildings without a word, prompting Luke to hurry after him.

Even as he quickened his pace to catch up, he continued scanning the neighborhood with curiosity, trying to figure out where they were.

The heat hit him first, a sign that his grandma had likely chosen this place out of familiarity —his family, like the one he had in *the before*, was from northeastern Brazil, where it was hot year-round, so the choice made sense. Additionally, the area felt like a coastal city, with a familiar hint of salt in the air.

His throughout inspection led him to spot a middle-aged man sitting on the porch of a nearby house, a plate of food beside him, gazing forlornly at the street.

He seemed to be the only person around.

*Did he break up with someone or what?* Luke wondered to himself but quickly pushed those thoughts aside as he stood before the front door of his grandmother's house.

He tidied himself up, nervously running a hand through his hair. After a moment of hesitation —Mr. D standing quietly beside him, an encouraging presence—Luke pressed the doorbell and waited.

Moments later, he heard footsteps approaching and a voice so familiar that it made his heart clench, the heavy accent a comforting sound to his ears.

"Hello? Who is it?"

Wetting his lips, Luke called out in his mother tongue, "Vó, sou eu, Luquinha.[1]"

Chapter End Notes

1 - "Grandma, it's me, little Lucas/Luke."

So, yeah, we're close to another time skip and, more importantly, the start of canon. 🎉🎉🎉

What I found funny in this chapter is Luke being mad at Kat for a character flaw he also has: being tight-lipped to the extreme. Though Luke is worse when you consider that he has something foreign inside him and refuses to seek help. Regarding that, he's learning something about it, and I'll give you one hint: pay attention to Hermes' and Dionysus' own aura moments.

On another note, Clarisse's issues have been hinted at, and Annabeth's abandonment issues were shown. Furthermore, those two still refuse to acknowledge their friendship.

Sadly, everyone is leaving—or dying. Luke was the oldest demigod at Camp in canon for a reason. The good news is that the visit to his grandmother is coming up soon (next chapter, lol). And yes, Luke is being rebellious™ and disobeying his father, but in his defense, he has supervision: Uncle D is on bodyguard duty.

In any case, thanks for reading! Comments are always appreciated! And it doesn't matter if you're late to the party!

In this chapter, we have a mystery man. He's not a god, but I plan to make him relevant in the future. Can anyone guess how? Hint: middle-aged man waiting for *someone* at the door…

# Chapter 28: Teenhood - Aparecida

Chapter Summary

Mr. D vs Grandma

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The silence was a bit awkward.

Luke sat on the sofa in his grandmother's living room, Mr. D beside him.

The god looked uncharacteristically out of his depth as he stared at the deceptively frail old woman across from him. She was settled comfortably in an armchair, a table laden with snacks separating them—treats she had insisted on preparing after welcoming them inside.

It was a simple spread, but to him, the sight of Brazilian food was both incredible and deeply nostalgic.

Leaning forward, he picked up one of the snacks she had prepared—pão de queijo, one of his absolute favorites—and took a bite, savoring the familiar taste as he refilled his coffee cup, glancing over at his grandmother.

She was a small, frail-looking woman with tan brown skin and short, salt-and-pepper hair, styled the way older ladies often preferred. Her dark-brown eyes, slightly teary, stayed fixed on him as if she feared that if she looked away, he might vanish. Also, she seemed to be purposely ignoring the other presence in the room.

Personally, Luke suspected she had barely noticed Mr. D was even there; after all, she had only ushered them—more accurately, ushered him—inside without so much as one spare glance at the god.

Clearing his throat, Uncle D finally broke the silence, his voice tinged with impatience.

"Good afternoon, Mrs…?"

Slowly, his grandmother turned her head toward the god, seemingly noticing him for the first time. And, well, she didn't look particularly impressed by what she saw.

"Aparecida Cardoso dos Santos." She replied, her tone curt. "Though you can use Castellan too if you will."

“Mrs. Castellan, a pleasure. You may call me Mr. D.” Dionysus intoned blandly, not displaying any reaction to her lack of friendliness. "I’m sure this sudden visit comes as a surprise, but we only recently discovered that Luke still had any living relatives."

His grandmother wore an expression that Luke knew *very* well, from both his memories of her demeanor when he was younger and his familiarity with his once-father's particular brand of rudeness. It was an expression that seemed to scream, *who is this old drunk and who does he think he is?*

“I see.” She mused dryly, scanning the god from head to toe imperiously through narrowed eyes—a somewhat funny sight, considering how much smaller she was compared to either of them. Pursuing her lips in displeasure at the end of her inspection, she asked pointedly, clasping her hands in her lap with deliberate slowness, “And where has my grandson been all this time?”

With the same kind of deliberateness, Mr. D took a cup of coffee and sipped it leisurely. Only when he was done, did he speak, his tone cordial, but clearly insincere. “We run a summer camp that Luke attends. His mother sent him to us.”

Well, Luke had essentially sent himself to Camp, but it was a matter of semantics; his mother had clearly been the catalyst.

Grandma hummed, her face set in an unimpressed frown, “And why would my daughter do something like that?”

Leaning back in his seat, Mr. D studied the old lady before him, delaying his response. Remarkably, she met his gaze without flinching. When he was satisfied with his inspection—or perhaps had gathered his thoughts—Mr. D clasped his hands, mirroring her, and replied carefully, “She is not…well.”

“Not well, how?” She demanded, her brows furrowing deeper. Uncle D remained silent—Luke could tell he was trying to find a tactful way to explain his mother’s condition.

As the silent stretched on, grandma Aparecida seemed to get increasingly frustrated. She straightened up, a gesture Luke *knew* meant she was about to stand and smack the answer out of Mr. D if he didn’t respond quickly.

“Grandma.” He chimed in hastily, redirecting her focus from Mr. D. “Mom isn’t the most…stable right now.”

“Indeed.” Mr. D agreed, picking up a pão de queijo and inspecting it nonchalantly. His gaze, however, drifted over to the woman every now and then. “That’s one of the reasons Luke stays with us during the year.”

Grandmother fell silent, raising a hand to her mouth as she processed the information. Gradually, though, a furious glint sparked in her eye, and Luke couldn’t help but sympathize.

It had to be really shitty to hear that her long-lost daughter was unstable and abandoned, especially since May was a single mom whose baby daddy simply left one day without a

word.

Frankly, it could even be interpreted that Hermes had left as soon as his mother became ill. It wasn't an unfair conclusion, though he grudgingly admitted to himself that his father's motives were likely unrelated to her condition.

"And what about that useless *father* of Lucas?" She asked, disdain dripping from her words.

There was so much contempt in her voice that Luke was sure it had enough poison to kill an elephant.

With a raised eyebrow, Mr. D answered nonchalantly, "We've contacted him. He's aware of the situation and prefers that Luke stay with us. It's for the best."

Luke was already predicting that this statement would not be taken well. At all.

And, of course, he was proven right.

Huffing, Grandma shot Mr. D a venomous look and retorted, her accent thickening around his name, "*Mr. D,* with all due respect, that man has no right to decide anything about my grandson's life. He abandoned my daughter when she needed him most, and he won't start being a parent now." She straightened up, adding with finality, "Lucas needs his family—a present family. He stays with me."

Furrowing his brows, Mr. D remarked, "While that might seem like a good option, unfortunately, it's not possible. It's already been settled."

Well, Luke had signed the papers to stay another year at camp, so the statement wasn't entirely inaccurate, though he had a feeling his uncle wasn't referring to that.

"Settled?" She echoed with derision, raising an eyebrow. "I didn't even know where my grandson was until today. And now that I do, and I'm ready to take him in, you're telling me he can't be with his own family? Just because his useless father said so?"

"It isn't that simple, Mrs. Castellan." Mr. D said, exhaling heavily.

"What isn't simple? To me, it's the simplest thing in the world. You're the one complicating things." Grandma argued stubbornly, refusing to back down. Narrowing her eyes, she added, "Does that man have something on you? I always knew he was trouble."

*Is she implying that Hermes is some kind of hooligan*? Luke wondered to himself, finding the shade hilarious—it was *so* accurate, and his grandma had never even met his father.

"Nothing of the sort." Mr. D instantly denied, looking a bit bewildered. He then collected himself, clasped his hands, and, with a serious expression, spoke, "Luke mentioned he stayed with you for a few weeks. Could you tell me a little about the experience?"

Luke cast a sidelong glance at the god, who clearly noticed but didn't bother to acknowledge it. He wondered if Mr. D was going to drop the whole 'myths are real' bomb on his grandmother and, to be frank, he wasn't sure how she would handle it.

She already disliked his father on principle, but finding out he was a pagan god? That might send her into a full-blown rampage.

Honestly, he'd pay to see that, though, obviously, his grandma's safety was more important.

"I could, yes." Grandmother replied, her eyes narrowing in a mix of suspicion and confusion. Despite her reservations, she continued, "Maria—May—showed up out of the blue with Lucas when he was just a preschooler. They stayed for a few weeks, and it was a joy. Then, without any warning, she disappeared one day, just like a thief in the night." With a displeased and somewhat sad expression, she murmured, "For the second time, even."

"I understand." Mr. D said, his fingers laced beneath his chin as he pondered it over. Leaning forward, he asked carefully, "And…did anything unusual happen while they were with you?"

"Unusual?" Grandma echoed, frowning. After a moment's thought, she replied matter-of-factly, "I suppose there were more demons than usual. Nothing that a spray of holy water couldn't handle; they all popped like balloons and returned to ashes, or a good broom smack did the trick." With the air of a wise elder, she glanced at them both and declared, "I was training to be a nun once—before I ran away from the convent, of course. I know how to handle spiritual battles."

*A nun? Demons? More than usual? Had his grandmother just hinted that she could see through the Mist and even kill monsters—with holy water?* Luke's eyes widened as he tried to reconcile that information with the image of the lithe, elderly woman sitting in front of him. With a sense of admiration, he thought, *if nuns are that cool here, then I want to be one too.*

But, alas, he was a man in this lifetime, so that wouldn't be an option.

Grumbling to himself, Luke glanced at his uncle, finally taking note of the silence that followed his grandmother's words.

Unlike him, Mr. D seemed at a loss for how to answer, clearly not fully appreciating just how incredible his grandmother's capabilities were. After a pause, he explained, "Those...demons are after Luke and others like him. Our summer camp provides a safe environment for them. That's why it's best he stays with us—there, he can train and study without having to worry about monsters."

"Bah." She huffed, leaning back in her seat and raising an unimpressed eyebrow at Mr. D. "Even if that were true, he should stay with family, not at some place where he'll be forgotten by the world."

"Mrs. Castellan." Mr. D intoned firmly, finally losing some of his patience. "While I understand your disbelief and your desire to have your grandson stay with you, it's for the best that Luke remains with us. I swear by the River Styx that I am telling the truth."

Thunder rumbled outside, making grandma glance at the windows with a frown before turning her thoughtful gaze back to the god.

“River Styx…” She mused, studying Mr. D from head to toe with a contemplative glint in her eye. “I suspected it when I first saw you, but you’re not normal. Who exactly are you? And how can I be sure you’re speaking the truth?”

*Was she aware of something?*

“I’m simply the director of the camp where he stays.” Uncle D explained, appearing deceptively casual. “This might sound like a lie, but Luke, like many of the children we house, is a demigod—the child of a god, specifically a Greek god.” He continued, “As for the truth, I’ve sworn by the Styx. You heard the thunder—that’s how you know I’m speaking honestly. If I were lying, there would be consequences. No one, not even gods, can break such oaths.”

“Gods, pagan gods.” Grandma Aparecida murmured, looking a bit pale but not entirely surprised. Her eyes widened as she stared at Mr. D with a look of accusation. “Maria was becoming very interested in those kinds of things before she disappeared the first time.”

Raising his eyebrows and tilting his head as if seeing her for the first time, Mr. D replied, “I met your daughter only once. She was a very lively and knowledgeable woman.”

Luke had a nagging suspicion they were talking about things that were going way over his head.

With a hum, his grandma gave the god a narrow-eyed once-over before seeming to accept whatever was being implied.

Turning to Luke, her tone softened, becoming more grandmotherly. “And you, Lucas, what do you think about living with me?”

Feeling a bit taken aback by being addressed after being ignored during the whole discussion, Luke shifted his gaze between his grandmother and Mr. D. With clear reluctance, he admitted, “I’d like to live with you, grandma, but I don’t think it’s the best idea. Monsters really do come after me.”

His grandma clicked her tongue, staring at him for a moment, and Luke wondered if she believed him—given how unsurprised she seemed, he’d wager she did—then, finally, she sighed.

Shifting her gaze, grandma locked eyes with Mr. D and said firmly, “Listen, gringo[1], I cannot accept you taking my grandson away.”

Mr. D’s face twitched at her tone, but he quickly composed himself. “And I cannot accept you taking Luke away either.”

Seeing his grandmother narrow her eyes menacingly, clearly ready to retort, Luke figured it was time to step in.

“I—” He began tentatively but stopped abruptly as both of them snapped their heads to look at him. Feeling a bit awkward under their combined attention, he pressed on and suggested,

“I think we can reach an arrangement, maybe…?”

Grandma Aparecida and Mr. D exchanged glances, momentarily engaging in a silent conversation. They apparently reached a conclusion, since his grandma sighed, speaking as if the idea greatly displeased her but was reluctantly necessary.

“Then let’s start negotiating.” She announced, her mouth twisting in displeasure as she picked up a cup of coffee that had been sitting forgotten on the table for too long. Turning back to face Mr. D, she demanded, “Mr. D, I want my grandson to go to school and get an education. I’m sure whatever he does in your little supernatural playground won’t be enough for his future.”

“Mrs. Castellan, I assure you that we have an excellent education system for our year-rounders.” Uncle D retorted, curling his lips downwards. “Sending him to a regular school would take up too much of his time and expose him to monsters.”

“Hah.” She snorted, stirring her coffee with a tiny spoon. “What are you teaching these kids? Obscure information with no use in the real world? No, my grandson will go to school. I won’t budge on this.”

Clearly exasperated, Dionysus pursed his lips and sighed. “I suppose we can compromise. Perhaps weekends and holidays at the camp, in addition to the regular vacation periods.”

“The entire vacation period?” She exclaimed. “No, no, no. It should be half with me, half with you.”

Mr. D tapped his fingers on his knees, looking deeply absorbed in the negotiation. Personally, Luke thought his grandma was handling the situation impressively—she was bulldozing through the issue like an out of control truck, but it was impressive all the same.

Of course, that was partly because his uncle wasn’t using his full godly presence to pressure her.

Unprompted, a past conversation with Mr. D resurfaced in his mind. He remembered that the god had mentioned how the major reason many demigods died was because their families refused to let them go.

The clinginess, he’d said, was often the end of many demigod children.

Luke hoped that Mr. D being willing to negotiate with his grandmother was a positive sign. However, he would only allow himself to feel relieved once a concrete agreement had been reached between them.

"Mrs. Castellan, Luke’s safety should be paramount." Mr. D finally retorted, his voice firm.

"Yes, and he’ll be safe here." Grandma insisted stubbornly. "I managed when he was young, and it shouldn’t be any different now."

“It is different. Luke is older now, which means he’ll attract more monsters.”

“And I’m telling you, I can handle it.” Grandma shot back, her annoyance becoming increasingly evident. “Those creatures never laid a finger on him when he was young, and that wasn’t luck. It was because of *me.* I got rid of them. I *know* how to get rid of them.”

Mr. D took a long look at the woman, his expression shifting subtly as if weighing his options. Whether he was genuinely accepting her words or simply tired of arguing, Luke couldn't tell.

Finally, Uncle D intertwined his fingers beneath his chin and proposed, “Here’s what we can do: the majority of the summer vacation will be spent with us, and the winter break will be entirely with you. But he’ll need to come to New York for the winter solstice to join the road trip we do with the other demigods.”

Clearly considering the offer, grandma took a thoughtful sip of her coffee, then set the cup down and said, “Fine. However, we *will* revisit this arrangement in the coming years.” With a scowl, she grumbled, “Since it’s too late to enroll him in school now, we’ll start this plan next year. *But* I expect him to be with me for this winter break.”

That was more than acceptable, but Luke had a nagging feeling that without specific dates or concrete details, it would only lead to endless headaches—he’d end up being a toy in a never-ending tug-of-war between those two.

“I’ll be there, vó[2]. Maybe Mr. D can exchange phone numbers or something to arrange the dates with you.” Luke suggested before Mr. D could speak, prompting the god to give him a *look*.

“Fine.” Uncle D drawled. “But he’ll need to return in time for the road trip with us.”

“Fine.” His grandma replied, matching Mr. D’s tone.

Then they both drank their coffees without one more word being uttered.

Feeling awkward, Luke followed their lead, carefully sipping on the coffee, though it was no longer hot, and kept glancing nervously between the two of them.

Once she finished her drink, Luke watched as grandma Aparecida stood up and turned to him, pointedly ignoring Mr. D’s existence. “Lucas, come. Let me show you the house.”

Throwing a glance at the god, who sighed and waved a hand dismissively while popping another Brazilian snack into his mouth—Luke noted it was the first time he had ever seen Mr. D eating any kind of food made by mortal hands, which might mean he actually enjoyed those snacks; perhaps due to the novelty—he stood up and followed his grandmother.

She led him down a corridor, and Luke’s curiosity took over as he eagerly took in his surroundings. The earlier awkwardness faded as he concentrated on the house’s interior, pushing aside the faint pulsing of the aura inside him with practiced ease.

While the outside of the house had seemed quite typical, the inside was a different story. It had a personal touch that spoke of the owner's heritage, making it feel immediately familiar

to him.

The amount of northeastern lace covering almost every flat surface he saw—particularly the tables—was nostalgic, as it reminded him of the decoration in his once-grandmother's house. There were also many pieces of traditional handicraft, including statues made of ceramics or clay, depicting cangaceiros, traditionally dressed men and women, or animals, most notably stylized birds—*chickens*; there were chickens everywhere. And that was without considering the paintings on the walls, which depicted scenes of people launching rafts into the ocean and the dry backlands landscapes of his once-home.

Absentmindedly, he noticed his grandma pausing before a table cluttered with photos, the wall behind it similarly covered. All of them were of relatives—cousins he had never met. Off to the side, in the smallest and most isolated frame, he spotted a picture of his long-gone grandfather. His mother had inherited his coloring, but all her features were from grandma.

Gently, she picked up one of the pictures, her touch careful. Without a word, Luke moved to stand beside her, looking down at the photo she held up for him to see.

It was another copy of the same photo he had—one showing Luke, his mother, and his grandmother during those weeks they spent together. Every time he saw it, the painful realization hit him hard: his mother had changed so much over the years that, though she was only thirty-three, she now looked like an old lady—so different from the lively young woman in the picture.

"Sometimes." His grandmother mused, her gaze fixed on the photo as she gently caressed it with a fingertip. "Sometimes I would come here, stare at this picture for hours, and wonder where you and your mother were."

"I'm here now, grandma." Luke said softly, giving her shoulder a gentle squeeze, which made her turn to him with a warm smile.

"You are, and I thank the Lord for it." She uttered, her expression full of genuine joy before it faltered. "But your mother…tell me, you mentioned she wasn't stable. How so?"

Luke wasn't sure how to answer. What could he say without making his grandma even sadder?

It had been years since he last saw his mother, and although he thought about her often—though less frequently as of late since new, urgent problems occupied his mind—he was sure her condition had only worsened.

At the start of it all, his mother had been as normal as she could be, despite failing to become the new Oracle and enduring the aftereffects of the curse Hades had placed on the spirit of the Oracle of Delphi.

She had her moments, of course, but they were brief and not all-consuming, and she would eventually return to her usual self. However, as the years went by, her condition deteriorated. Her episodes became longer and more intense, and they began to affect her everyday

behavior. She became increasingly dreamy until she could no longer distinguish her visions from reality.

Luke remembered the times she would shout lamentations and half-mad prophecies at him, her predictions ever-changing and *never* clear, while gripping his arms so tightly that it left bruises. He would try to hide when he saw the signs of an episode starting—locking himself in his room, sometimes even retreating to the closet, covering his ears as she screamed and screamed for hours.

But none of those were news he thought his grandma wanted to hear. Yet, to refuse to tell would be a disrespect to her person—grandma wasn't a child.

Biting his lips, Luke paused and tried to gather his wits before he explained, "Mom has a sickness in her mind. It's like she's trapped inside herself and the person who we interact with is not her. Not really."

Grandma closed her eyes, taking one deep, shaky breath to center herself. When she opened them again, she had a steely look within them as she inquired, "Did she have someone—anyone—to help her? Help you?"

"No." He whispered, wriggling his hands in discomfort. "It was just the two of us."

For a long time, it had been only mom and Luke against the world. And it was fine, even fun, until her episodes started to worsen. Then it became a constant lesson in misery.

His grandma clicked her tongue, and Luke saw her hold on the picture tighten. Forcing herself to relax her grip, she started to speak, not once taking her gaze away from the frozen scene of her daughter's bright laughter, "I told her, you know, that she could stay with me. That I could help raise you, giving her time to study, maybe find a stable job. But she didn't want to." Letting out a heavy, dejected sigh, she added, "Your mother has always been *too* willful."

Yes, May Castellan was a headstrong woman, and perhaps that was what had attracted his father to her in the first place.

Hermes was a trickster god, so a bit of whimsicalness in his chosen partners seemed to be on par with him. Although Luke wouldn't presume to know what his father's preferences were—nor did he particularly want to.

"Where does she live?" Grandma abruptly asked.

Casting a glance at the woman's profile, Luke wondered what this new line of questioning was aiming for, but answered nonetheless, "Westport, Connecticut."

"Far away." Grandma grumbled, furrowing her brows in displeasure. Placing the photo down, she continued, "Too far to go and check on her occasionally."

"Father checks on her, or at least that's what she told me a few years ago." Luke offered, though he had reservations about the validity of this statement.

His mother was not well, and he doubted she had a strong enough grip on reality to understand what was happening around her half the time. So, in his opinion, the claims of Hermes coming to visit her were just that: *claims*.

Scowling, his grandma harshly muttered, “That useless man, or god, or whatever he is—it doesn’t matter in the end—shouldn’t even be allowed near her.” She exhaled sharply, her expression turning weary as the deepening wrinkles made her seem almost fragile. “But, to his credit, *if* that is true, he’s doing something—a little too late, but something.”

“Yeah…” Luke agreed reluctantly, not feeling particularly appreciative of those efforts after he and his mother had been left to fend for themselves for years.

However, a sharp jolt of realization hit him—how did his mom support the house if she couldn't work for obvious reasons?

His puzzled musings were interrupted by his grandma’s tentative voice as she suggested, “Maybe she could come here and live with me. It’s better than leaving her alone when she’s so fragile.”

Luke was inclined to agree, but lingering doubts made him wary of that solution.

Would Hermes allow it? If his father had truly been the one behind their financial support all these years, and if he really had been visiting his mom—aside from his stalking hobby, of course—would he even allow her to leave that house?

“Maybe it is.” Luke commented, his tone light. He knew from his grandma’s temperament that he needed to choose his words carefully. “But perhaps you could speak with the director about it?”

Maybe Mr. D could help them.

Grandma made a face, then repeated, stressing the name in a mocking tone, “The so-called *Mr. D*? What authority does he have to meddle in things that don’t concern him?”

Rubbing the side of his neck, Luke whispered, “Grandma, he’s a god. He can help us.”

“*I knew it!*” She hissed louder than Luke would have liked, prompting him to tap her arm a few times to signal her to lower her voice. Thankfully, she did. With a thoughtful look, she narrowed her eyes and hummed, “That’s why he’s using that fake skin of his.”

“Fake skin?” Luke echoed dumbly, widening his eyes in alarm.

Sure, the gods could choose their appearance, but describing it as ‘fake skin’ seemed a bit… exaggerated. To Luke, they appeared as normal as possible—perhaps slightly uncanny at times, but nothing that would lead to such a conclusion.

“Yes, didn’t you see? It looked like clothes that were too tight, barely containing everything.” She answered, frowning as she faced him. Then, she waved one hand dismissively and casually said, “Don’t worry. You’ll learn.”

“I see…?”

Tapping him on the shoulder, grandma said lightly, “You will.” Brushing past him, she added, “Now let’s head back, galego[3]. That gringo will start wondering if I’m changing your mind about our little arrangement if we stay here too long.”

Soon, they were back in the living room, where Mr. D lounged on the sofa with a languid and irreverent air, even going as far as raising one eyebrow as they entered.

“Did you have a pleasant family reunion?” He commented with a drawl.

“We did.” Grandma replied dryly, giving him a disapproving glance.

Feeling a bit uncomfortable as the tension between them resumed, Luke nodded in agreement.

Despite everything, he genuinely enjoyed the visit.

“Good.” His uncle commented, rising up from the seat. “Unfortunately, we must go back now.”

Before Luke could take a step forward, his grandma grabbed his arm and sharply addressed Mr. D, “Aren’t you forgetting to give me your phone number?”

The only sign of the god’s displeasure was a slight curl of his lips. Nevertheless, he pulled out a piece of paper and quickly scribbled on it before striding over and handing it to her.

Grandma Aparecida read the number with narrowed eyes, then shot a suspicious glance at Mr. D before saying, “I’ll call later.”

What went unsaid but was clearly heard was this: *You better not have given me the wrong number on purpose.*

“Yes, yes. Just don’t call too late, or nobody will answer.” Mr. D replied, nearly rolling his eyes but managing to restrain himself.

Grandma didn’t appear to have noticed, and if she did, she didn’t point it out, but Luke saw it as clear as day. Instead, she huffed, ignored the god, and turned back to Luke, enveloping him in a tight hug that he returned with equal force.

“We’ll see each other again.” She whispered, stepping back to hold his face between her hands for a moment. Her sad smile lingered just long enough for him to blink back his tears and nod. Then, she let her hands fall and cleared her throat, allowing him to follow Mr. D out.

As he closed the door behind him, he heard his grandmother exclaim one last thing: “Remember, he’ll stay with me this winter break!”

Soon after, the sensation of Mr. D’s aura became overwhelming, and the world began to spin, forcing him to close his eyes. When he opened them again, he was back in the Big House’s

living room, inside Camp Half-Blood once more.

Even the dizziness from the magical travel couldn't diminish his happiness at the moment.

He was going to live with his grandma! Well, not exactly, but it was close enough for him.

"Well, Lucy." Mr. D called, already halfway through the corridor. "The harpies are certainly done with the cleaning, and I need a nap after this *delightful* visit to your grandmother."

Without waiting for an answer, the god marched away.

Luke didn't really mind the rudeness, as he was used to it by now. What mattered more was the rush of joy filling his veins, making him practically skip out of the Big House.

Although he knew he still had to face many battles to alter his fate, it didn't seem so daunting anymore. He had made one significant change: the lack of a scar—and grandma, his grandma, would be part of his life!

*I'm the only one who can shape my own path,* Luke firmly reminded himself as he headed over to his friends, *my choices pave the way.*

Chapter End Notes

1 - Gringo: non-Brazilian — I heard somewhere (correct me if I'm wrong) that it has some negative connotations in Spanish-speaking countries, but in Brazilian Portuguese, it is a neutral term. Sometimes, it's even used toward people who stayed too long outside the country or those born abroad due to their 'gringo' ways, lol.
2 - Vó: grandma
3 - Galego: something like blondie — in northeastern Brazil, it's a way to refer to people who have light-colored eyes and/or hair.

As for the cultural context, cangaceiros were essentially bandits from the northeastern region of Brazil—criminals who were quite brutal. They formed groups and roamed the backlands, invading towns, pillaging, murdering, and raping. However, it was a reaction to social issues, and, even though it's an unfortunate part of history, it is a very significant aspect of the region's culture, especially in literature. As for pão de queijo, it's basically a baked cheese ball.

And yes, Brazil isn't just a vast forest; if you look up pictures of the Caatinga, you'll see what I mean. There's a portion of semiarid land within the national territory.

So, grandma Aparecida. I envision her as this tiny, no-nonsense woman, and her backstory is honestly pretty interesting. She went to a convent to become a nun with her sister, didn't like it, so she ran away, got involved in some crazy shit, somehow made it to the US, married a man who was pretty well off financially, and had children. During her last pregnancy, she went back to Brazil after a… disagreement with her husband,

using the money she took from him, and that's where May was born. Then she returned to the US, her husband died at some point (we do not speak about it), and here she is.

And yeah, she complains about May running away, but she definitely got that from grandma, lol. Also, the Cardoso surname comes from a type of plant named cardo (thistle) that is really thorny, which is fitting, lol. The names chosen all have meaning. Luke and Lucas are essentially the same name, meaning 'bringer of light,' while Maria, aside from the obvious (Virgin Mary), can mean 'rebellious' among other meanings.

As for the negotiation, I'm sure there will be many other talks. I doubt Mr. D will accept the going-to-school idea that easily. And when Hermes finds out about all this, he'll be mad—there will probably be a second fight, lol, or maybe he'll be too busy to notice.

In any case, thanks for reading! Comments are always appreciated! And it doesn't matter if you're late to the party!

Considering this is the last chapter before the canon timeline starts, what do you guys think of the journey so far? And what are your first impressions of grandma Aparecida?

# Chapter 29: TLT - The Glory of Commerce

Chapter Summary

> Luke is now 19 🎉
>
> The canon timeline has officially started, with strange dreams and our mystery god making another appearance.
>
> TLT - The Lightning Thief

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

> Luke was falling.
>
> He had no idea how long it had been since he first started plunging through the darkness—only that it felt like far too long.
>
> *This is just a dream,* he tried to reassure himself, but the cold seeping into his bones and the sheer terror gripping his heart felt way too real.
>
> No matter where he looked, the scene remained the same: an endless, dark pit, so black that he couldn't see an end to it. But the worst part was the screams—countless voices clamoring over one another, some in agony, others inflicting it.
>
> Then the darkness began to shift, and he found himself standing on solid ground.
>
> All around him, the scene of Aubrey's death played in an endless loop. Her blank, glassy blue eyes—so much like his own—stared at him, empty and accusing. Suddenly, her body jerked, and Levi's amber eyes locked onto him, his gaze confused yet slightly hopeful as he mouthed, too weak to speak aloud, "My mother…w-who is it?"
>
> Luke tried to close his eyes, to block these gruesome scenes from his sight, but he couldn't.
>
> *He couldn't.*
>
> In a horrified trance, he watched as the loop repeated endlessly. Blood seeped from the corpse, trickling toward him slowly but surely, until it was ankle-deep, gripping his legs with a force that felt like it was trying to drown him. As if suddenly struck by his senses, Luke tried to escape, but no matter how hard he pulled, his legs were stuck, forcing him to relive the worst moments of his life over and over again.

Throughout it all, the echoes of ‘My mother’ reverberated inside his skull, while the shifting faces of the dead—Aubrey’s, then Levi’s, and at times those of other demigods he once knew, the ones who had never returned to Camp—stared back at him.

Abruptly, the chaos ceased, and the sounds fell silent.

Before his eyes, the corpse melted into the puddle of blood beneath it, yet he remained rooted in place—trapped.

*Don’t you find it unfair?* A voice from deep within the void asked, its tone like knives scraping against stone—ancient, cold, and powerful. *You never asked to be born, yet you all die because of your parents.* A heavy gust swept through Luke, and the scene of his father at Aubrey’s funeral appeared before his eyes—he felt the old anger and hurt he thought he had long buried stirring beneath his skin once again. *Parents who do not mourn you.*

No matter how many times he heard that voice, Luke would never get used to it.

Shifting to a more sly tone, it whispered, almost pressing down on him with its persistence, as it tried to persuade him for what felt like the thousandth time, *Aren’t you tired of it, little demigod? Don’t you wish to change it?*

Shutting his eyes, Luke hunched over and covered his ears in a desperate, futile attempt to block out the sound, shaking his head in denial the whole while.

With a hint of disappointment, the voice delivered its final words with the gravity of an executioner’s sentence, *One day, you’ll see the truth, demigod. You’ll see.*

As it faded, its last words echoing through the darkness, the world began to crumble.

Just before Luke could fall into the vast nothingness beneath his feet, he woke up.

With more self-control than he thought he had, he stifled his gasps and gripped his thigh, his nails pressing into his skin through the fabric with enough force to hurt. The pain grounded him, confirming that he was in the real world.

Gradually, his breathing slowed, and he began to calm down.

Luke inhaled deeply, released a long sigh, and then quickly looked around to see if anyone had noticed his embarrassing reaction or, more importantly, if there were any monsters nearby.

He was on a train, surrounded by narrow spaces and *way* too many people to feel comfortable letting his guard down.

Really, the fact that he’d even managed to nap was surprising.

However, Luke was exhausted after taking a plane from Florida to New York before the sun had even risen, especially since it was the first time he’d done so alone.

Usually, he traveled with his grandma, or Mr. D would take him to Camp.

But, at nineteen, he could handle things on his own. Monsters tended to think twice about challenging him now that he was old, making it arguably safer than when he was younger.

Even so, he hadn't slept at all, which made wandering around the city with his newfound independence—his only other visits to New York had been for Olympus—more difficult. Yet, he'd pushed himself to stay awake and squeeze in some sightseeing before he could finally get to the safety of Camp Half-Blood.

Which, evidently, hadn't worked all that well.

Rubbing his face now that he was as safe as he could be, Luke mulled over the dream—nightmare, really.

He'd been having those dreams for the past few months, and from the start, he'd thought they were strange. Initially, he'd chalked them up to some odd demigod experience rather than something truly sinister.

But when the voice began to appear, Luke became certain it wasn't natural and began to suspect what—or *who*—it really was.

It tried to offer him strength, tried to convince him to rebel and seek revenge for all the demigods who had died since he'd arrived at Camp nearly a decade ago—for his friends, for his family, for all the young ones who were gone too soon. When that didn't work, it shifted tactics, using his mind against him. It let his subconscious conjure the images, manipulating him with memories of his long-dead but still precious loved ones.

He hated it, and even more, he hated that he was tempted. After all, he knew better than anyone where that path would lead.

But seeing Levi's empty, hopeful gaze asking about his mother—*his friend should have been claimed long ago*—haunted him every time he closed his eyes, filling him with so much bitterness that he couldn't help himself.

It all came to a head on the last winter solstice, the day he could no longer deceive himself that canon wasn't fast approaching.

Frankly, he should have known that with a major prophecy in play, the Fates weren't going to let things stray too far from their intended course.

Luke had been on Olympus that day, keeping a sharp eye on the young demigods in his care to prevent them from offending any passing deities or random powerful entities—not that it was all that difficult, given that most of them were napping.

Honestly, it had been a pretty ordinary day—or as ordinary as a visit to the home of the gods could be—until the sky darkened and storms began to form directly above the meeting place of the Twelve Olympians.

He still remembered the way he felt when he saw it, his heart sinking to his stomach in horror and disbelief, but not in surprise. Somehow, deep down, Luke knew this was much bigger than himself, and if he didn't take on the role, another demigod could easily occupy his place.

There were many children at Camp filled with bitter resentment, after all.

In any case, they were quickly sent back to Camp Half-Blood, leaving the kids confused and scared about the reasons, not helped at all by the raging storm above Olympus.

Yet, only Luke—and the thief—knew what was really happening.

After all, from what he'd read in the books, Zeus was convinced that Poseidon was behind the theft, and Poseidon, of course, was deeply offended by the accusation.

Personally, Luke didn't think it was a far-off paranoia—the sea god had been part of the Olympian riot eons ago.

Standing up as he neared his destination, Luke wondered if Kronos' plan was the same as in the books and whether the identity of the demigod behind it truly mattered.

*In the end,* he thought to himself, *I don't think it'll change much.*

Whether it was him or someone else, that person would just be a pawn for the Titan, with the plans and schemes all originating from Kronos himself. So, it wouldn't be surprising if the core of it remained the same, even if Luke hadn't allied with the Titan this time—not even after all the manipulation and invasions of his dreams.

And it *was* Kronos. There was no other possibility.

Shaking his head to clear away the gloomy and, frankly, disturbing thoughts, Luke followed the crowd out the train and found himself inside Grand Central Terminal. As he walked around the interior, Luke took in the sights and impressive artwork, his head swiveling to catch every detail—he had always had an appreciation for beauty, a trait carried over from his past life.

But after wandering around New York aimlessly for quite a while, it was high time to head to Camp. Unfortunately, that meant he had to cut his sightseeing short.

Sighing with a hint of disappointment, Luke stepped outside into the bustling world, crossing the street. Then, he glanced back, his gaze drifting up to the grandiose statue perched above the terminal's entrance.

*The Glory of Commerce,* he mused, examining the statue with less enthusiasm than the other artworks. Despite his personal reasons for disliking it—mainly because of his father—he could still appreciate the detail and effort that went into creating such a masterpiece.

Suddenly, the aura—that little intruder he had begrudgingly grown accustomed to—pulsed within his chest. This time, though, it felt different, as if it were in sync with something else. It grew so strong that it became slightly uncomfortable, then, abruptly, it stopped.

With a deep sense of unease, Luke cast a sweeping glance around him as discreetly as possible. At first glance, the scene seemed ordinary—people going about their day like a nest of ants—but he couldn't shake the feeling that the unusual behavior of the aura meant trouble.

His hair stood on end. Even when he tried to expand his senses—he was pretty good at detecting godly energy these days, or so he thought—he could only catch the faintest hint of something brushing against him before it faded away, like it was muffled.

In a way, it was quite similar to how the aura within him managed to change nature to become more elusive—

*I still owe that Roman,* he suddenly remembered, a pit forming in his stomach, *he mentioned we would meet again when I was older.*

Then he saw *him*—the same turtle-neck shirt and trench coat, the same friendly smile.

He stood in the midst of the crowd, people skillfully avoiding him but otherwise ignoring his presence, as if he was invisible.

With the grace of a predator, the god glided toward Luke, coming to a stop only when he casually positioned himself beside him.

Luke's heart raced wildly in his chest, but he was rooted to the spot, unable to move.

Even if he could, what was he supposed to do?

There was no way out of this.

"I must say, you have excellent taste, mortal." The god remarked casually, his tone laced with satisfaction as he gazed up at the statue.

Tightening his grip on the strap of his backpack, not entirely sure how to take the compliment but reluctant to offend the deity, Luke responded as neutrally as he could, "Thank you, sir. I try to honor my father."

The god's smile froze, and he slowly turned to look at Luke, his gaze locking on the bracelet he still wore, specifically the caduceus charm his father had 'forced' on him. After a moment, he hummed nonchalantly and remarked, his tone slightly off, "Your father, of course."

Uneasiness gripped Luke's spine at the god's reaction, making him wonder if he had somehow managed to offend him after all.

Without a hint of having lost his composure, the deity turned to face him, his smile unchanged—neither widening nor shrinking—as he kept his artificial friendliness. However, his eyes held a glint that unsettled Luke.

"While appreciating art is admirable," he began, "perhaps you should consider another activity now." He drawled with a sly tone, "To…mix things up, I'd say. New York is such an interesting city."

“Perhaps.” Luke agreed reluctantly. He glanced around at the people moving past them, seemingly oblivious to their presence, and tried to disengage politely, recalling the ‘lesson’ on respect the god had…taught years ago. “Unfortunately, I need to head back to Camp.”

“A pity.” Luke felt a flicker of hope that he might escape unscathed, only to have it brutally crushed by the god's next words. Amusement tinged the man’s tone as he continued, “But surely, attending to the god you owe is a higher priority, wouldn’t you agree?” He glanced at Luke with a smirk playing on his lips and added, “And I’ve always considered you to be quite the clever mortal.”

Silently, he cursed the deity for the pressure put on him and those twisted little mind games, feeling very much like a bird toyed with by a cat.

Perhaps his face betrayed his thoughts, because the man smiled with evident amusement, leaning forward as he commented with a hint of malice, “I do recall mentioning in that card I gave you that we’d meet again once you were older, didn’t I? You’ve had your warning—so why the reluctance?”

*Filho da puta*[1]. Luke didn’t appreciate the veiled threat at all.

Though he hated to admit it, the god’s words were true.

Over the years, he had more Latin lessons with Chiron and managed to translate the card. Even if the message seemed innocuous, it carried an implicit warning—running away would be useless.

And the intruder within his chest only made it all the more apparent.

“I wouldn’t dare waste sir’s time.” He replied stiffly, trying another angle even though he knew it would likely lead nowhere.

The man had chosen to appear to him for some unknown reason, and it didn’t seem to be on a whim—though it was possible, he couldn’t be certain.

Raising an eyebrow, clearly entertained by the exchange, the god placed a hand on Luke's back—making him stiffen even more—and began guiding him, his tone courteous and unhurried.

“Waste? I’d call it time well spent, *Graecus*.”

Still uncomfortable with the intrusive touch—was it a god thing, this disregard for personal boundaries?—he didn’t resist being led away.

There was no point.

The man’s aura enveloped them, less aggressively than the last time they had met, making the walk feel almost brief, for lack of a better term. Before long, they found themselves in front of a store—a very fancy store, to say the least.

He had only a moment to catch the name before he was guided inside, but frankly, he found it quite self-explanatory: *'Opulentia.'*

Once inside, Luke felt distinctly out of place.

Everything radiated wealth and luxury: the walls shimmered with silver, the furniture was high-end and crafted from the finest materials, and the jewels—so many of them—sparkled under the light of the massive crystal chandelier overhead.

And here he was, wearing sweatpants, flip-flops, and an oversized t-shirt.

Shaking off his discomfort as best he could, he made his way to where the god was, who had moved on while Luke had been too busy gaping at the surroundings.

As he reached the man, he cast a sidelong glance while the deity asked the employee to bring out some watches, acting as if he were in charge. Honestly, Luke couldn't understand why he had been brought along on this shopping trip.

He didn't have enough money to order even a cup of water in this place, let alone afford a piece of jewelry.

Before he could blink, however, the employee—a woman with a slightly grayish tint to her skin—returned with a board displaying a selection of watches, each one undoubtedly more expensive than his grandmother's house and his mother's combined.

The god scrutinized each watch with an imperious air, the woman standing perfectly still—*was she a nymph?*—until he finally selected a silver one with a thoughtful hum. He picked it up with care and turned to face Luke, a smile spreading across his face.

"This one suits you." He commented, taking Luke's wrist to position the watch next to his skin as if to check how it looked.

*What the hell?*

Instinctively, he pulled his arm back, causing the god's smile to vanish and his gaze to turn unreadable—an expression that was, truly, quite intimidating.

Luke quickly searched for an excuse and said, his tone careful and awkward, "I don't like wearing watches."

It wasn't even a lie, if he was being completely honest.

The god took a moment to examine him, his eyes moving over Luke's face as if assessing his sincerity, until they settled on his earrings—small, discreet golden hoops.

Humming thoughtfully, the deity placed the watch back on the board and waved dismissively at the woman. "Very well. Bring us some earrings instead."

That wasn't exactly what Luke had meant, but he was way too wary to be blunt. What if this powerful being took it the wrong way? Luke was just a puny human, after all.

“I…I don’t have the money to pay for any of this.” He tried again.

Evidently, it didn’t work.

The god turned to him with slightly furrowed brows, a touch of irritation in his expression. With a smooth, almost patronizing tone, he replied, “You won’t need to worry about payment. These are gifts.”

“Gifts?” Luke echoed, a hint of disbelief slipping into his voice despite his efforts to remain composed.

There was no such thing as a free lunch, especially when it came to gods.

Instead of answering right away, the man picked up one of the earrings the nymph had brought back—one studded with diamonds—and held it up next to the demigod’s face, who did not dare to move. The god clicked his tongue, set the earring aside, and picked up another. Only then did he speak, “I’m already quite satisfied with our last trade. Think of these trinkets as a little extra gift.”

“Trade?” Luke repeated in puzzlement, frowning as he looked up at the deity. Then he quickly smoothed his expression and said politely, hoping to extract more information, “Forgive me, sir, but I seem to have forgotten the details of our agreement.”

The god paused, his cold brown eyes locking onto him for a moment before he snapped his fingers, sending a ripple of his aura sweeping through the area.

Luke shivered involuntarily as the foreign energy inside him pulsed in sync with the god’s.

And he wasn’t the only one affected.

The employees—all nymphs with grayish skin, he noted—hurried to retreat to the backroom as if the devil himself were on their heels, some even casting him relieved yet slightly pitying glances.

“I’ll refresh your memory, *Graecus*.” The god declared once they were alone, making Luke tense instantly. But what the deity did next took him by surprise.

He lifted a hand to his chest, and when he drew it back, a ball of pulsing energy in a swirling mix of blue and peach appeared in his palm—surprisingly visible despite Luke’s usual struggle with *sight*. It was distinctly different from the god’s usual aura: it felt weaker, far less intense, and unsettlingly familiar.

Almost as if it were a different kind from the god’s.

Like a moth drawn to a flame, Luke leaned in, momentarily forgetting everything around him —the energy felt almost like home. He was jolted back to reality when the god abruptly closed his fist around it, meeting Luke’s gaze with a mischievous, almost mocking smirk.

“This one is mine.” The god tutted. Then he raised his other hand to press a finger against Luke’s chest, adding with a sly glint in his eye, “And this one is *yours*.”

It felt as if a bucket of icy water had been dumped over his head, jolting him back to *that day* and suddenly making him understand what the man was talking about.

This energy was what had been *taken* from him.

“It seems you remember now.” The god remarked with a satisfied tone. Opening his fist, he allowed the energy to pulse gently, observing it with keen interest. Tilting his hand to show it to Luke, he reached out with a single finger, only for the energy to deftly evade him, curling away. Adjusting his approach, he hovered his hand above it and watched as it tentatively reached out. With a hint of fascination, he commented, “So shy, yet charmingly curious, with a touch of something *different*.” Casting a sly glance at Luke, he added, “I wonder what that says about you.”

With wide eyes, Luke felt a chill run through him as he processed the god’s words. Struggling to maintain his composure and noticing the deity’s predatory gaze, he said, “I’m flattered, sir, but I must admit I’m not quite sure I understand your meaning.”

Smirking, the god closed his fist around the energy, sealing it away—much to Luke's visceral disappointment.

With an amused glint in his eye, he drawled, clearly unconvinced, "Naturally, you don’t." He then placed a finger back on Luke's chest, directly over the aura, and released a touch of his own energy, making both pulses synchronize and causing Luke to shift uncomfortably. "I wonder—did you even attempt to understand this?"

As the sensation worsened, the pulsing becoming more uncomfortable as the god's aura trickled in with increasing force, Luke confessed before the discomfort turned to pain, “I did.”

Humming as if he had just unraveled a mystery, the god restrained his own energy and asked absentmindedly, “And what have you learned, mortal?”

*Little,* he thought immediately, but, obviously, kept it to himself.

“That it’s a part of you.” Luke replied hesitantly—he knew it was obvious, but the rest was unclear, and he didn’t want to risk offending a deity.

“Precisely.” The god raised an eyebrow and studied Luke with a hint of anticipation. “What else have you discovered?”

Pausing, Luke stared at the god with a lost expression, unsure what to say. Should he mention how the energy mirrored his emotions, or how it felt curious yet calculating? Maybe he should talk about how it changed nature at times?

How he thought it was a tracker?

Perhaps he had remained silent for too long, because the god’s expression darkened, growing more unsettling. Leaning closer, the deity remarked with a lazy air that masked his annoyance, “How disappointing. Weren’t you curious about me, too?”

“I—I think it’s elusive...?” Luke stuttered, making the deity pause and then lean back, his expression shifting back to a friendly mask, though there was a hint of underlying hardness. He gestured for him to continue. “It feels busy too, I think. Maybe magnetic as well?”

Humming with satisfaction, the god's smile spoke volumes as he replied, “Impressive for a mortal.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Clearly pleased, the man snapped his fingers again, this time with a gentler burst of aura, all the while giving Luke a brief, scrutinizing look. He then turned his attention back to the earrings as the same nymph returned with the board in hand.

Remaining still as the god continued to browse through the jewelry, occasionally holding pieces up to the side of his head as if to see how they'd look, Luke pondered the so-called ‘trade’ they had made—it wasn’t even a real negotiation.

Although little had been revealed, it was clear the god was interested in him and considered their…trade fair.

Suddenly, Luke recalled the books he’d read about the Romans, which had described them as pragmatic.

*If* the god’s curiosity was indeed the reason behind his actions, and if that energy was a part of Luke just as the aura within him was a part of the god, then the assessment of Roman practicality seemed accurate.

It unsettled him.

The thought that the deity might discover something he shouldn’t, like his past life, loomed in his mind. The god’s mention of something ‘different’ only heightened his discomfort. For now, it seemed that as long as the man’s curiosity persisted, these energies would remain within each other’s chests.

“This one.” The god’s voice cut through Luke’s thoughts, pulling his attention to the item the man was holding up, looking very pleased with himself.

It was a pair of silver hoops, made from a material he didn’t quite recognize but could tell was expensive by its shine. The design was simple, featuring a meander pattern, and if he were honest, it was something he’d like.

However, despite the deity’s insistence that it was a gift, Luke couldn’t shake the feeling that accepting it would come with an unspoken debt, making him uneasy even though the man had said otherwise.

“It is pretty.” He admitted honestly. But once again, he tried to sidestep the situation. “But it’s too expensive, sir. I’m not comfortable wearing something so luxurious.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” The god retorted immediately, his brow furrowing and his expression turning serious, dropping the mask of politeness. "You’re more valuable than anything else in

this place."

*Was that supposed to be comforting?* Luke wondered, frowning at the man.

Feeling a surge of irritation at being reduced to an object, he countered, more sharply than he intended, "I must remind you that I'm not a thing, *sir*. I'm a person."

Silence met his words, and regret washed over him instantly.

The nymphs around them exchanged wide-eyed glances, subtly edging away, while the one holding the earrings stared at him with fear. The god, however, merely tilted his head, a confused frown crossing his face—it was the most genuine expression Luke had seen from him yet.

"Indeed." The man mused, studying Luke with those cold, unnatural brown eyes, his brows slightly furrowed.

Thankfully, he didn't seem offended, allowing Luke to breathe a little easier, and the same could be said for the nymphs, who all appeared visibly relieved.

Silently, the god gestured for the nymph holding the earrings to leave, and she did so quickly, almost like she were fleeing. As if responding to an unspoken command, the other nymphs also moved away.

Luke felt uneasy, but his apprehension was eased slightly by the lack of reaction to his sharp-tongued remark. Even so, he still didn't trust or understand this god; he was too unpredictable.

But…maybe he could try to persuade him to remove the aura?

It seemed like a risk worth taking, especially since he wasn't going to ask for his own piece back—he knew that was pointless—and the god appeared less…intense this time.

"Sir—" He began nervously, but was quickly interrupted.

"I'll overlook your impertinence this time, *Graecus*." The god remarked, summoning a sleek black velvet jewelry box. Without giving Luke a chance to respond, he slipped the earrings inside and handed the box over to him.

"I appreciate your kindness, sir." Luke said, holding the box awkwardly. He watched, puzzled, as the god smiled with an entirely too self-satisfied expression. Noticing the unexpected reaction, he cautiously added, taking advantage of what appeared to be a good mood, "If I may, could we revisit the terms of our trade?"

The god's smile faded into a more artificial expression as he scrutinized Luke. In a low, measured voice, he asked, "What's left to discuss? Our deal was of equal value."

Gathering his courage, Luke suggested, "Perhaps, sir, you might consider taking back what belongs to you. Your divine energy naturally holds more value than a demigod's." He

hesitated briefly before continuing, “And, since you still hold my part, it might be fair to reassess one of the favors I owe you, just to make sure everything stays balanced, of course.”

*Please, just think it over and don’t punish me,* he thought, warily staring as the god blinked slowly, meeting his gaze with an unreadable expression.

Humming, the deity retorted, “Indeed, that’s precisely why you owe me a second favor, demigod.” His expression remained blank, but his voice was neutral, with a subtle edge of displeasure. “Most mortals who carry a fragment of a god’s essence would consider it a great honor.”

With his heart racing, Luke scrambled to respond, his voice breaking into an embarrassingly high pitch. “It is!” He cleared his throat and continued with a more controlled tone, “I am honored that you’ve shared this with me.” Internally, he thought, *actually, I’m not.* “But I’m Greek, sir.”

Furrowing his brows, the god studied Luke for a moment before smirking and saying, “Don’t worry, demigod. The Greek pantheon won’t interfere with the choices of mortals.” With a pleased, slightly spiteful smile, he added, “Besides, they’re far too preoccupied now to concern themselves with such trivialities.”

*Won’t interfere? That doesn’t sound very true.*

Besides, that wasn’t what he had meant at all, and he didn’t see how this situation could be considered a choice, especially since the god seemed displeased by any suggestion of removing the aura. However, the allusion to the theft caught Luke’s immediate attention, pushing his concerns about the aura to the background for now.

“Is that distraction related to…whatever happened on Olympus?” He asked softly.

Casting a sidelong glance at the demigod, the god placed a hand on Luke’s back, guiding him toward the exit. Leaning in closer, he murmured, “The Greeks have made a grave mistake, and now they’re facing the consequences.” With a touch of disdain, he continued, “And, *naturally*, the repercussions are impacting us as well.”

Curious, but still wary, Luke eyed the deity, wondering if the Greco-Roman syncretism affected them as it did in the books.

It felt odd to consider this god, with his clearly distinct individuality, as merely a split personality of a Greek deity. This was especially true given that, according to Kat—who was researching to her heart’s content now that she was in college and often called him to share her findings—the Romans had separate origins from the Greeks.

It made him wonder sometimes.

“I see.” Luke mused cautiously after a moment, debating whether to ask more even though it was clear the god wasn’t eager to share further.

However, he didn’t have much time to think it over, since they had already reached the exit.

Holding the door open, the god gently guided Luke to pass before following him out. Once they were in the oddly empty streets outside, the deity's eyes turned glassy for a moment before he masked it with a smile and said, "It seems we must part ways now." Moving closer, he playfully tugged at Luke's hair and whispered, "I look forward to our next meeting, Lucas."

Immediately, the deity scrunched his face as if in pain, which unsettled Luke even more than the overly familiar gesture.

"Sir…?" He approached cautiously, leaning in to examine the man's expression as one would do a dangerous beast. "Are you alright?"

Strangely, the god smirked, his eyes sparkling with what looked like smugness despite the slight crinkle of pain at the corners.

"While your concern is quite sweet, there's no need to worry about me, demigod." He answered, straightening up and smoothing down his clothes—Luke observed how some parts of the fabric had changed before quickly reverting to the god's current outfit. Smiling down at Luke, he said, "In any case, I suggest you head back to your little Greek Camp." His smile shifted into a smirk, a glint of mischief in his eyes, as he leaned in closer and whispered, "Or would you prefer to join me instead, precious jewel?"

Shivering slightly at the 'jewel' comment, Luke took a step back and hurriedly replied, "Ah, I need to head back, sir. They need me there."

With a highly amused expression, the god chuckled before wincing slightly. Then, he uttered, his voice tinged with a hint of strain, "If you're certain."

In the time it took for Luke to blink, the god had vanished.

Feeling a bit unsettled by the strange encounter—though he had to admit it had been less frightening this time—Luke quickly moved to the side of the road, took a golden drachma from his pocket, and exclaimed in Ancient Greek, *"Stêthi, Ô hárma diabolês!*[2]*"*

Before his eyes, the drachma was swallowed by the road. Thankfully, he didn't have to wait long; moments later, a taxi began to rise from the spot where the coin had vanished, now bubbling with a strange red liquid. It was a peculiar vehicle, gray and smoky, as if it were shaped from mist.

Without hesitation, he climbed into the cab and said, "Good morning, ladies. One trip to Camp Half-Blood, please. I'll make sure to tip well for good service."

The three old hags in the driver's seat, all with greasy hair draped over their eyes—or rather, the empty sockets where their eyes should have been—bony hands, and coal-colored dresses, cackled in response. One of them, the one behind the steering wheel, shrieked, "Long Island, extra fare!"

Soon, they were speeding through New York, driving the wrong way down streets, weaving between cars and even a truck, and zooming over pedestrian walkways. Meanwhile, the Gray

Sisters bickered and fought over the eye and tooth they shared, but Luke chose to ignore them.

He was more preoccupied with the troubles that were bound to appear soon, and he was pretty sure Percy would show up at Camp any moment now, if he wasn't already there.

With a sigh, his gaze fell on the jewelry box in his lap, and he guessed he had the Roman to worry about as well. Pressing his lips, Luke opened the box and stared at the expensive earrings inside, wondering why the god had given him such a lavish gift if he wasn't going to ask for something in return.

*Wait a minute*, Luke thought, panic flooding his veins, *did I somehow end up with a sugar daddy?*

Wrecking his brain, he stared at the earring with a blank expression, debating whether to do something with it or just stash it away and forget about it.

Maybe selling it? That might be insulting, even though he was tempted due to being broke as hell. Throwing it away? Same issue. Forgetting about it? That seemed like the only practical option.

*I think it'll be fine, or so I hope,* he concluded after a moment of existential crisis, *that man said he wouldn't demand anything….*

With a jolt, Luke's eyes widened in alarm as he replayed the day's events in his mind, suddenly realizing something crucial—something he couldn't believe he had only just figured out.

*Holy shit, this isn't good.*

Chapter End Notes

1 - Filho da puta - son of a bitch
2 - Stêthi, Ô hárma diabolês! - Stop, Chariot of Damnation!

As of now, Kronos is trying to tempt many demigods to his side. I'm planning *things*, though the beginning will be similar to canon and will gradually change due to Luke's interference. Aside from that, a fun fact is that Saturn, his Roman counterpart, is actually viewed more positively.

Grandma Aparecida has been teaching Luke some things, as has Chiron. This includes seeing through the Mist, though it's not going all that well. Luke is not that gifted in *sight*. And yeah, she lives in Florida. About the arrangement situation (and Hermes), we'll see Luke's thoughts about it next chapter.

And here he is, our mystery god. He's a bit more mellowed out here—now, why is that? You guys tell me, lol. The whole scene, I had this song (roughly translated) stuck in my head on a never-ending loop that I recently got addicted to: *I am rich, very rich. There are millions in my account and it doesn't take much effort, it's natural for me.* And yeah, Luke freaking out and immediately thinking he's now a sugar baby, lol. Besides all that, more aura and energy stuff here, with Luke trying to wiggle out and make a deal to get rid of it. And the Greco-Roman thing—I have *ideas* about it.

Another fun fact: the nymphs here are mountain nymphs, called Oreads or Oreiades.

In any case, thanks for reading! Comments are always appreciated, and it doesn't matter if you're late to the party!

Now, who is the Roman god? 👀

# Chapter 30: TLT - Percy Jackson

Chapter Summary

Luke being the Camp Mom™ and he’s tired of it (Hermes please give him a salary)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"And now I'm sad!" Inês told him again, her voice cracking a little.

Honestly, Luke had heard this story from her lips at least a dozen times.

It was always the same: his friend got involved with someone, only to break both the guy’s heart and her own in the process. She was almost succeeding in upholding the Cabin Ten tradition—except she wasn’t supposed to be sad about ending things with her boy toys.

Alas, Inês was an empathetic woman.

"Tragic." Luke replied absentmindedly, barely paying attention to her current woes as he focused on getting the lace braid ponytail in Annabeth’s hair just right.

“You’re not even taking me seriously!” Inês exclaimed, her dark brown eyes slightly red from crying, with mascara streaked down her cheeks.

“What a harsh accusation to make against a friend who’s diligently listening to the same story for the hundredth time.” Luke retorted as he braided the side of Annabeth’s head, who was visibly annoyed by both the topic and the other kids watching him work his magic.

They were all in Cabin Ten, a fact that never ceased to baffle him, considering he was willingly walking into his worst nightmare. But it was a lot easier to put up with the Aphrodite kids now that his friend was the counselor and could keep the little beasts in check.

*Plus, the younger ones aren’t that bad,* he thought, casting an amused glance at the two girls flanking Annabeth, their serious expressions fixed on his hands as they moved with practiced ease.

One of them was Drew Tanaka, tall for her age, with long, pitch-black hair framing her face. Her warm brown eyes were focused intently on his hands as she mirrored his movements with her own. Thankfully, she wasn’t the stuck-up, rude teenager from the books just yet. Right now, she was a pleasant, if slightly snooty, twelve-year-old—maybe a bit insecure and still uncomfortable in her own skin, but certainly not insufferable.

The other was Silena Beauregard, her wavy black hair styled half-up and secured with a bow, and her blue eyes watching him attentively. If he was being completely honest, it felt a bit strange to be around her sometimes, especially knowing that in the books, it was Luke who turned her into a spy.

However, he forcefully reminded himself that those events wouldn't come to pass here.

Silena was just a thirteen-year-old girl, a year younger than Clarisse, and Luke would never take advantage of one of his charges.

"No, it's not! This time was different." Inês argued, then sighed heavily and collapsed onto her bed with a dramatic flourish. "He's *so* nice to me, and handsome…"

"Maybe you shouldn't have broken up with him if he's so great." Luke suggested, raising an eyebrow as he turned to face her.

Honestly, he didn't get the Aphrodite cabin's whole 'breaking hearts' routine. He knew it was their rite of passage, like theft was for his own cabin, but it just seemed…cruel to make someone fall in love and then shatter their heart as if it were all just a game.

"You don't understand." She retorted, her voice muffled as she hugged a pillow to her chest in a display of misery—just like she had the last four times.

Luke shot her a *look* before rolling his eyes, prompting her to stick out her tongue at him, which he pointedly ignored.

Clearly annoyed, Inês sat up again and retorted with a teasing glint in her eye, "Or maybe you *do* understand, and we just haven't heard about your escapades."

The other two girls stopped their examination of Annabeth's hair to stare up at him with wide, eager eyes, clearly catching on to some juicy gossip. Even Annabeth turned to look at him, her expression one of disbelief—which was, honestly, quite insulting.

But, well, it wasn't an entirely unfair reaction, especially since Annie wasn't exactly wrong.

"Ah, ladies." He sighed dramatically, making the girls lean forward in anticipation. Then he crushed their expectations with a smirk. "I'm a demure, home-loving man. I don't do those sorts of things."

The silence that followed his words was so thick one could hear a pin drop, and the girls' incredulous expressions were downright hilarious.

Clicking her tongue, Inês pursued her lips and muttered, "Saint Luke strikes again. What did I even expect…"

Amused, Luke shook his head at their reactions and returned to Annabeth's hair, making the final touches and securing the ponytail with a hairband.

"All done. What do you think?"

“It’s fine.” Annie replied, giving her head a slight shake to test it, appearing quite satisfied with her new hairstyle.

“Stop doing that!” Drew exclaimed, narrowing her eyes. “You’re going to mess up your hair.”

Annabeth shot the other girl a disparaging look and retorted, “We’ll just end up messing it up anyway.” With a sniff, she added, “If you participated more in the practical lessons, you’d know that.”

Seeing Drew’s cheeks redden from the uncalled-for rebuke, Luke admonished slightly, “Annie…”

Annabeth pursed her lips and crossed her arms, making no move to apologize.

*This girl is going to be the end of me,* Luke thought with a resigned sigh.

“Did you guys hear about the new camper?” Silena quickly shifted the topic, placing a hand on her younger sister’s arm, who huffed but settled down, still glaring at Annabeth.

“I did. He even killed the Minotaur.” Annie said, disregarding Drew entirely.

From the moment Percy arrived at Camp two days ago—and wasn’t it the coincidence of the century that Luke had arrived the same day as him?—Annabeth hadn’t stopped talking about him, convinced he was ‘the one.’

Ever since Chiron caved under the force of Annabeth’s persistence a couple of years ago and told her she had to wait for a specific person for a quest—Luke was also convinced the centaur must have shared the Great Prophecy with her at some point—Annie had viewed every new arrival as a beacon of light, a sign that her moment had finally arrived.

This time, though, she was finally right.

Besides, she was a bit restless, and Luke could understand that feeling since she’d been stuck at Camp since she was an itty bitty seven-year-old. And, well, he could also admit that he made things harder for everyone since quests were still banned.

"The Minotaur...that's no small monster. It’s completely insane that a new demigod could actually defeat him." Inês commented, standing up and moving to her vanity desk—perhaps to finally fix the black tear tracks staining her face.

“I wonder who his godly parent is...” Silena mused aloud, causing Annabeth to take on that familiar look Luke knew so well—the one where she was deep in thought, close to a breakthrough, and wouldn’t say a word until she was certain of her theory.

Still, he could pretty much guess what was on her mind: that the new kid was one of the Big Three children, a half-blood of the eldest gods or whatever.

Honestly, the term ‘eldest gods’ never made much sense to Luke. The oldest children of Kronos were the three goddesses, with Hestia being the eldest of them all. However, it was

just a minor, useless detail, since he already knew Percy was involved in the prophecy anyway.

“Do we even know if that’s true?” Drew asked, her brows furrowing slightly. “It’s hard to believe that a newly arrived guy could kill one of the most dangerous monsters just like that.”

“It’s true.” Annabeth retorted seriously. “I saw the horn.”

Pausing slightly, then turning to face the blonde girl with a glint in her eye—a glint very familiar to Luke, like a shark smelling blood—Drew inquired sweetly, “And how did you see the horn exactly? The newbie isn’t in any of the cabins yet.”

Annabeth gave her an unimpressed glance and replied dryly, “He’s in the Big House infirmary. It’s not like we have separate rooms for when we get hurt.”

What she conveniently left out was that she visited the infirmary even when she wasn’t injured. Luke knew this from catching her there several times, especially after Lee had complained that she was crossing the line from helpful to bothersome and making his job harder.

Luke was certain that she was pestering the sick boy and questioning him about the winter solstice’s *event* during the few times he was awake, which, of course, was hardly the behavior of a proper caretaker.

“Strange.” Drew drawled with a smirk. “You didn’t seem to be hurt the last few times you went there.”

And there it was. He couldn’t even pretend to be surprised that this bit of gossip had already spread.

Without quests or errands for the gods, things were quiet and, frankly, boring—which, for Luke, was perfect; he liked the peace. However, it meant that any new event was squeezed for all its worth, like juice for the starving, nosy kids at Camp.

And Percy’s situation was anything but ordinary—prime gossip material.

Curling her lips into a frown, Annabeth glared at the other girl and declared, standing up abruptly and marching to the door, “I’m too busy for this.”

“Off to see your boyfriend, Miss Brainiac?” Drew called after her, giggling as Annabeth slammed the door behind her.

For all that it was meant as a rib, the girl wasn’t entirely wrong. Luke knew Annie was probably heading to the Big House to check if Percy had woken up *again*.

“Drew! That wasn’t nice.” Silena exclaimed, her face set in a disapproving frown.

Huffing, the younger girl stuck her nose up in the air but shifted slightly in discomfort at the rebuke.

While Silena was right, there was another way to resolve the issue without alienating Drew, who was just reacting to a jab in the only way she knew how.

She was young and still had time to learn.

“Little lady, how about next time we hang out, I do your hair? That way, you might get a chance to chat with Annie about these disagreements you two have.” Luke suggested gently as he stood up.

Drew’s eyes lit up at the prospect of a new hairstyle, but she seemed hesitant about the idea of talking to Annabeth.

“Only if she doesn’t look down on the things I like again…” She mumbled hesitantly, staring at the ground.

*That* was something he needed to talk to Annabeth about—this new habit of hers to assume that Demeter and Aphrodite kids were somehow lesser demigods, or weaker, just because they liked things she didn’t.

Obviously, she wouldn’t say that outright, but he could tell. He’d known her since she was a seven-year-old brat, after all.

“I’ll talk to her. Besides, I’ll be there too.” Luke reassured, smiling down at the girl.

She nodded shyly, stealing glances at his face.

Satisfied at the compliance, he moved over to Inês, playfully patted her shoulder, and teased, “I’m looking forward to our next breakup gossip session, friend.”

“Oh, you. Maybe you should try dating someone before complaining about my relationships.” She countered, reapplying her mascara with a huff.

Snickering a little, he walked toward the exit and waved goodbye to the girls, only retorting once he had reached the safety of the door, “I don’t need to date anyone to see that you have a rotten finger when it comes to men.”

Quickly, he ducked out of the cabin just as a hairbrush flew toward him and heard her exclaim, “Watch out for karma, Saint Luke!”

Shaking his head with a smile, Luke silently wished her good luck with that. He knew his own taste was impeccable—far superior to hers—and karma wasn’t about to change that.

No matter that he hadn’t dated anyone in all those years; that was just a minor detail.

Once outside, he let his smile fade and leaned against the walls of Cabin Ten, looking up at the sky. The aura continued to buzz within him as he rubbed his chest, and the sensation quickly brought his thoughts back to the Roman god, making him feel uneasy.

He had hidden the jewelry box as best as he could, not wanting his nosy siblings to find it and start asking questions. Nor did he want Mr. D to notice; the last thing he needed was his uncle

suspecting anything.

They would likely jump to conclusions and assume he was... *involved* with someone important, especially given how clearly it was a costly gift—well outside Luke's budget.

And, well, while it wouldn't be an entirely wrong conclusion, it wouldn't be quite right either.

In the end, Luke *was* involved with someone important, just not in the way most people might think. And it wasn't of his own volition, despite all the 'trade' talk the god went on about.

Really, with all the talk of *understanding* and the peculiar sensation of the aura, he should have realized long ago that the deity in question was Mercury.

But then again, everything becomes clear in hindsight.

Though Luke was relieved the man hadn't been offended enough to punish him for confusing him with Hermes at the statue, the whole situation still left him confused, wondering why his father's counterpart seemed so interested in him and reigniting his doubts about whether they were truly the same deity.

When he remembered how Mercury's clothes had shifted and a flash of pain crossed his face, Luke couldn't help but think that his dad had been trying to take control.

It stirred a fear within him that his father might somehow know about the aura, though it was ridiculous—Hermes had *never* mentioned anything about it.

Still, the man's aura was clearly different from Hermes'—Luke could say that for sure after having it on him for five years. And then there was Mercury's irritation at the Greeks...

Sighing, he acknowledged that these questions wouldn't be answered anytime soon. Perhaps not until he met the Roman again, or maybe not even then, since the god seemed to enjoy playing games.

To be truthful, what Luke *really* wanted was to get this thing off his chest and he hoped that next time Mercury would be more willing to remove it. Maybe he'd be pleased that Luke had figured out his identity and would be more inclined to listen.

Or maybe not.

In the end, as Uncle D had once told him, trying to understand trickster gods was a fool's errand—though he'd said that in reference to Hermes, the advice was still valid. Besides, Luke had more pressing concerns than puzzling over a Roman deity's motives.

With a nod to Lady Hestia, who smiled back at him as she tended the central fire in her youthful form, Luke made his way to his cabin. He observed the children running around him, some stopping to greet him as they passed by.

Frankly, it was a strange sensation being the oldest demigod around, and it was proving to be quite stressful as well.

Somehow, Luke had become the Camp's primary adult figure, even more so than Chiron—though that wasn't too surprising, considering Chiron wasn't around all the time and wasn't a demigod either.

And the older demigods had all left or died.

He didn't like to dwell on it, but sometimes he wondered if the quest ban had pushed the campers to leave earlier, to return to the mortal world before they were ready.

But thinking about it was unproductive; it only made his mood darker and his nightmares worse.

Entering his cabin, Luke was greeted by a packed room. Children were sprawled everywhere, with bedrolls scattered across the floor, leaving barely any space to walk without stepping on them.

If he had to compare it to something, it would be a can of sardines.

He certainly felt like one.

"Big bro." He heard someone call out from somewhere.

Furrowing his brows, Luke scanned the room, observing the campers going about their day—why they had all decided to stay inside today was a mystery to him—when a second call made him slowly look up, already dreading what he might see.

There, he saw Travis hanging from the ceiling fan, wiggling to make it spin, a grin spread across his face.

Already feeling his blood pressure spike, Luke hissed, "How did you—never mind. Get down!"

"But it's fun." Travis whined, spinning faster.

Luke could already see how this would play out: the fan would collapse with Travis still clinging to it, bones would be broken, and he'd be the one getting yelled at for the damage—of course, it would be him.

It always was.

The woes of being the oldest *and* the counselor, he supposed.

"*Fun?* You're going to fall and break your neck at this rate!" Luke scolded, frantically looking around to figure out how in the burning hells his brother had managed to climb up there.

“I’m like a cat, I fall on my feet.” The brat answered sassily, even having the audacity to laugh at Luke’s worry.

“A cat?” He repeated, incredulous. Then his eyes landed on problem child number two, who was watching Travis with a bit too much interest, alongside Chris. Luke just knew they were involved. Striding over to them, he crossed his arms and glared, making them shrink back, as he demanded through gritted teeth, “You two. Get him down. *Now*.”

“But bro—” Connor started, trying to come up with an excuse, but Luke wasn’t having any of it.

“*Get. Him. Down*.”

Both of them scrambled off as soon as he finished, grabbing a chair—where had they stolen that from, the Big House?—and tried to catch Travis’ legs as he continued to spin and laugh.

Luke exhaled heavily, already bracing himself for the impending disaster, and scanned the room for the one person he knew could help. He quickly spotted her—a girl with dark hair, medium olive skin, and almond eyes—and made his way toward where she sat.

“Chiara.” He called, catching her attention. What was with that peeved expression? For God’s sake, it felt like the kids were competing to see who could make his day more stressful. Narrowing his eyes at her, which made her roll her eyes in response—*the nerve*—he pointed to the trio and ordered, “Go help them.”

“Why?” She asked petulantly, crossing her arms with a frown. “I have nothing to do with it.”

It seemed she was in one of her particularly difficult, stubborn moods today.

*Great*. Just what he needed.

Taking a deep breath, Luke pinched the bridge of his nose before slowly intoning, a warning clear in his voice, “*Chiara*.”

With furrowed brows and wide eyes, she huffed, quickly standing up and saying grudgingly, “I’m doing it because I want to, not just because you told me to.”

Luke would try to pretend he believed that.

“Yes, yes.” He replied dismissively, keeping a frantic eye on his brother as he hurried her over to where Connor and Chris were struggling to pull Travis down with little success.

Chiara observed the scene with an unimpressed sneer for a moment, then turned back to Luke and warned, “I’m not very good at this, and manipulating probabilities is hard.”

“I know, kid.” He answered flatly, keeping his eyes locked on Travis and tensing, ready to act at the slightest sign of his brother falling. “But if you can prevent the worst-case scenario, that’s already good enough for me.”

Harrumphing, Chiara studied the boys carefully, her gaze fixating on things only she could see. Then, lifting a hand, she snapped her fingers.

Immediately, Luke sensed a subtle, almost imperceptible shift, as if the world had nudged just a fraction to the right. The minor change seemed to tire Chiara, causing her to waver slightly on her feet.

Stubbornly, though, she kept scowling as if nothing was amiss, glaring at the boys like they were the source of all her problems. With a haughty lift of her chin, she turned away, but her attempt to maintain a proud stance faltered as she stumbled off.

As Chiara walked away without a word of goodbye, Luke raised an eyebrow but chose to let it slide, given that she had actually helped—even if she was being a bit bratty about it. Besides, she needed the practice; manipulating luck could be a powerful ability, even in its weaker forms, and it might one day save her life.

Especially now, with Kronos beginning to take action.

Turning his attention back to the scene and feeling infinitely more at ease, he watched as Chris finally secured a firm grip on Travis' feet and pulled him down safely, while the younger boy giggled as though this were all just a game.

Really, at this rate, he was going to end up with gray hairs.

Maybe he should ask Hermes to stop having kids if Luke was going to end up raising them—or at least request a salary for it.

Suffice to say, dealing with his brothers was a daily struggle, and he was beginning to think he deserved some compensation for it.

Walking over to them, he gave Travis' hair a rough ruffle and playfully complained, "Way to give me a heart attack, zero one."

His brother pulled back and whined, "Bro, I'm fine."

"This time. You're fine this time." Ignoring the eye roll—*kids these days were too bratty*—Luke snapped his gaze to the other two, who tensed up. Addressing Connor first, he said, "Zero two, stop putting ideas into your brother's head." Turning to Chris, his tone softening since the teen was quiet and a bit shy, he added, "And you, Chris, as the older one, shouldn't just follow whatever these two come up with."

Connor nodded with an innocent expression that Luke didn't believe for a second, while Chris looked properly chastised.

Studying them for a minute to make them squirm and ensure the message stuck, Luke narrowed his eyes and then finally relaxed, satisfied.

"You're free to go." He said, giving them a final sharp glance before they could escape. "And behave yourselves, or I *will* find out."

Watching the three of them hurry away—the Stoll brothers chatting a mile a minute while dragging a bemused Chris along, no doubt to do exactly what Luke had warned against—he wondered what the hell his father was up to.

Chris was his brother, that much he knew, and Luke had even shared this knowledge with the boy. Though this revelation had brought Chris some happiness, the sadness in his eyes made Luke question whether he should have said anything at all.

Despite two years having passed since Chris' arrival, he remained unclaimed, even under his own father's roof.

The thought that Hermes might have forgotten to do so made anger surge through Luke's veins, but he quickly took a deep breath and tried to calm himself.

Rubbing his face, he moved to sit on his bed, wondering if his father was so busy he had lost track of the fact that time passed differently for mortals.

*Or,* he thought with a heavy heart, *maybe Hermes had simply forgotten which children were his.*

As disappointing as that was, it wouldn't be surprising. Not really.

Besides, the god had been silent for five years, and, honestly, Luke didn't mind it much, especially since those years had been the calmest he'd experienced in a long time.

The last time he had heard from him was when Hermes stormed into Camp a few weeks after Luke's visit to his grandmother during winter break—in the middle of the night, no less—and practically kidnapped him from his bed to confront him about his disobedience. In a low, menacing voice, his father reminded Luke of their deal and warned that breaking it again would have serious consequences, though he would graciously overlook it this time.

The encounter had been, frankly, very frightening, especially with Hermes' aura lashing out like a caged beast. At the time, Luke had thought his father was being overly dramatic—buried under all the fear he had felt, of course. Now, however, he saw that Hermes had a point, as much as he hated to acknowledge it.

Mercury was out there, after all.

Maybe that was why both his father and the Roman had kept silent all these years, which Luke sincerely thought should have lasted a bit longer than it actually did—he was already missing the peace.

In any case, Mr. D showed up, waved him back to bed, and had a *talk* with Hermes. Thankfully, as Luke later learned, his uncle managed to strike a deal with his father, letting him continue visiting his grandmother.

How Mr. D had done it, Luke didn't know—and frankly, he didn't want to.

But the fact remained: he was allowed to visit Grandma.

However, *unfortunately,* the arrangement had changed, which essentially meant he hadn't been allowed to go to school. His father had argued Luke was the counselor and couldn't be away from the cabin year-round, and he just knew Mr. D hadn't protested too hard—his uncle had made it clear he wasn't a fan of the school idea either.

So, by the grace of democracy, it had been concluded Luke would only leave Camp during the weekends and holidays, with a short chunk of the vacation period spent with Grandma as well.

This, obviously, didn't make her happy, but there was nothing more that could be done without angering his father and risking revoking this 'privilege,' as Hermes had put it.

Suddenly, he caught sight of the front door opening.

Outside, Chiron stood with Annabeth and—he noted with interest—an awkward-looking boy he assumed to be Percy, as the doorway was too small for the centaur to pass through.

Soon enough, his cabin-mates slowly took notice and, one by one, rose, bowing respectfully to Chiron.

It was a miracle his little hellions were actually behaving. Luke was almost proud.

Acknowledging them all with a smile, Chiron turned back to face the newbie and said, "Good luck, Percy. I'll see you at dinner."

Then, Chiron hastily galloped toward the archery range—Luke guessed the centaur had a lesson scheduled; Lee had mentioned something about a master's class today—leaving the boy behind.

He watched with some amusement as Percy stood frozen, his face stiff as he took in the dozens of demigods staring right back at him.

None of his little charges had bad intentions; they were simply curious about the boy who had killed the Minotaur—which was only natural—but Percy had no way of knowing that. If Luke remembered correctly, the kid had suffered bullying at all the schools he had attended, which would explain his wary behavior.

To his credit, Percy stood tall, keeping his gaze fixed on the children. It reminded Luke of how the kid had been described as impertinent in the books, and, frankly, he could see why.

"All good?" Annabeth urged the boy, an impatient, if slightly critical, look on her face. "Go ahead. Come on."

The poor child hurried to obey and stumbled as he passed through the doorway, causing a few of Luke's brats to snicker. However, a warning look from him quickly silenced them.

With a hint of red in his cheeks, Percy straightened up, trying—and failing—to hide his embarrassment.

Rolling her eyes, Annabeth announced, "Percy Jackson, I present to you Cabin Eleven."

“Normal or undetermined?” One of his brats asked.

Percy looked uncertain and confused by the question—had no one explained things to him?—but Annabeth answered promptly, “Undetermined.”

With one collective voice, all the campers groaned.

Seeing he needed to step up, Luke moved toward the newcomers, using the opportunity to study the son of Poseidon.

Percy was a scrawny kid with intense, sea-green eyes that seemed to pop from his face, tan skin—suggesting he’d spent a lot of time in the sun—and disheveled, jet-black hair.

In summary, he looked like a little delinquent and not particularly impressive.

Sending a stern glance at the campers around him, Luke said, “We receive all guests with open arms.” Turning to Percy with a smile, he added, “Welcome, Percy. Feel free to ask me any questions you might have.”

The kid studied him, though not as discreetly as he probably thought he did, which was a bit endearing if he was being honest.

Clearing her throat to draw their attention, Annabeth moved closer and stood up proudly, gesturing toward Luke. “This is Luke. He’ll be your counselor for the time being.”

“For the time being?” Percy echoed with furrowed brows.

The question made Luke wonder yet again if anything had been explained to the boy—or if he had even been shown that cursed Orientation Film of Apollo’s. It was a source of second-hand embarrassment, but at least it covered the basics and would have helped Percy get his bearings at Camp.

“You haven’t been claimed yet.” Luke explained calmly, a speech he had delivered hundreds of times ever since he became counselor. He gestured for the two kids to follow as he searched for an empty spot on the ground to designate for Percy. “Because of this, we don’t know which cabin you belong to. So, for now, you’re here. Cabin Eleven takes in all newcomers and guests.” Stopping before a clear area, he turned to face the boy. “The caduceus you saw at the entrance represents our patron god, Lord Messenger, the god of travelers. That’s why we’re open to everyone.”

“Messenger? You mean Her—“

Luke quickly covered the boy’s mouth and said seriously, “We don’t speak the gods’ names aloud. They can hear it and might take it as disrespect.”

Better for the boy to learn it here, in safety, than risk offending the wrong all-powerful being. Despite his potential, Percy was still a demigod, which meant he was as mortal and vulnerable as any ordinary person. Sure, he had the advantage of being a water-bender and more durable than a regular mortal, but beyond that, he still bled red.

Seeing Percy nod with a confused frown, Luke removed his hands and clapped them together with a smile. “Well, this spot can be yours.” Noting that Percy had nothing aside from the large Minotaur’s horn, he added, “I’ll get some supplies for you later. Don’t worry.”

Honestly, what Luke really meant was that he would steal the supplies, but it was better not to mention that to Percy. Who knew if the kid would get paranoid about being robbed?

In any case, maybe he should bring the Stolls along to keep them occupied and use it as a brother-bonding activity. Chris could join too. The idea was something worth considering.

“Thank you.” Percy eyed Luke warily before glancing at the other campers with the same cautious expression.

“No problem. Any questions?”

“Ah, yes. How long will I be staying here?” The kid asked innocently.

Annabeth’s expression hardened, and she shot Percy an annoyed look. It seemed a bit unfair, given that the boy didn’t really know much of anything.

“Well, until you’re claimed.” Luke replied gently, giving Annabeth a *look*.

“And how long will that take?”

Laughter erupted at the boy’s question, and Percy’s frown deepened with confusion. The uncertainty in his expression made Luke feel a pang of sympathy.

“Come on.” Annabeth instantly interjected, clearly eager to escape the humiliating scene. “I’ll show you the volleyball court.”

In a dry tone, the boy retorted, “I saw it already.”

“Come.” Annabeth repeated more harshly, grabbing the kid’s arm.

Before she could drag him away, Luke put a hand on her shoulder. Pulling her closer, he pointedly whispered, “Be patient with him, okay? Remember, *tolerance*.”

Annie made a face and countered, “I *am* tolerant.”

Raising his eyebrows with an unimpressed expression, Luke stared at her in silence.

“Fine! I’ll try.” She huffed, rolling her eyes.

*Kids these days, no respect.*

Then, without giving him a chance to say anything else, she hurried away, dragging the poor Percy behind her.

Crossing his arms, Luke watched them leave with a mix of exasperation and amusement. Soon, he became serious, turning to find his brothers and head to the Camp Store to *acquire*

some of Percy's supplies.

Internally, Luke sighed with resignation, realizing that his peace and quiet was finally over.

Chapter End Notes

All the demigods are from canon, aside from Inês, of course. I even surfed the wiki, lol. During that exploration, I found out about Chiara, who seems to only appear in The Trials of Apollo (a series I haven't read), but she seemed interesting—and powers related to luck are always fun! Of course, the Stolls are causing trouble, and poor Chris got dragged along for the ride.

On that note, Hermes snapped. There are a couple of reasons for his behavior, but one in particular is this: Camp Half-Blood is a Greek camp, which means Luke is safer from son-stealing weirdos with bad intentions, lol. And yeah, Mr. D didn't put up much of a fight—I imagine he probably didn't want Luke risking himself outside either. Of course, Grandma is furious, but it was either accepting it or not seeing Luke, so she grudgingly agreed. At least Luke gets to visit her regularly.

As for Percy, he's finally here, and he knows nothing. Annabeth is a bit judgmental in this chapter, but I always got that energy from her in the beginning of the books—along with that Athena fangirl thing she had going on. She slowly improves, so yeah, she'll get better eventually, but right now, she's twelve and restless from being cooped up for so long. Then we have the Aphrodite girls. In my head, Drew is insecure, and for a child of Aphrodite, that's like asking to be eaten alive, so she overcompensates.

So, Annabeth knows the Great Prophecy. I imagine that Chiron's *conversation* with the Oracle (I think it was said in TLT that he knew Annabeth's destiny) likely hinted at Annie's involvement, which is why he told her about it. As far as I recall, she is the only one who knows it aside from the gods and Chiron.

Now, Mercury. He's a trickster god too, but the major difference between him and Hermes is that Mercury is, above all else, a **merchant**, while Hermes is more of a **thief/traveler**. So, yeah, they're similar but different. That's how you get his playful, unpredictable nature mixed with that transactional behavior. Also, the Glory of Commerce is a statue depicting him right in the center, which made Luke think and figure out by the end of the last chapter that Mercury was Mercury. About the jewelry store, I had this thought about him being wealthy due to being a god of commerce and financial gain, and also because precious jewels are often used in money laundering, then there is the liquid silver/quicksilver thing, of course. Besides, I like to think that's just one of his businesses and that he has many, many more.

Then there's the whole mystery of the Greco-Roman thing starting, lol.

Anyway, thanks for reading! Comments are always appreciated! And it doesn't matter if you're late to the party!

Was anyone surprised by the Mercury reveal? And how long do you guys think Luke will remain a demure, home-loving man? Lol.

# Chapter 31: TLT - Son of the Sea

Chapter Summary

Pipo saves the day and Percy gets claimed.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Several days had passed since Percy arrived, yet the other campers' curiosity hadn't faded.

As the boy's counselor, Luke set up a daily schedule, just as Aubrey and Axel had once done for him, to test Percy's abilities and determine which activities suited him best.

Normally, the major lessons were conducted with the whole cabin, but not all of them. Given Cabin Eleven's unique circumstances, it would be disingenuous to assume that all the children were meant to share the same lessons—they had demigods from other gods as well, which meant different talents and priorities for each of them.

In any case, Percy had tried nearly every camp activity, and he wasn't particularly good at any of them. The boy's aim was bad, he was slow, and Clarisse trashed him every time they wrestled—Luke made a mental note to speak with her soon, as she was going way out of line. The only silver lining was that the kid was good at canoeing.

*And swordsmanship,* Luke admitted to himself, glancing at the boy sitting quietly beside him, who sipped his blue drink with a look of longing in his eyes.

The kid was good, and even better after drenching himself in water. But, alas, Percy was still a thousand years too early to defeat him—or even come close to disarming him, really.

However, the boy was talented. That was a fact.

Throughout the week, his fellow head counselors—as well as the more mature campers—kept their eyes on the kid, trying to guess which god was his parent and where he would end up. Or if he would actually end up in a different cabin at all.

Personally, the fact that the only thing Percy was good at, aside from smacking people with a stick, involved water was already a clear sign of his parentage. Then again, Luke already knew the truth, thanks to having read the books in *the before* where the scrawny kid was the protagonist—so it was just a confirmation of his biases.

For those who didn't know, he could just be the child of a minor water deity.

But not for Annabeth.

The girl was closing in on the truth like a hound on a scent, and she didn't seem pleased with her suspicions. Luke knew she wanted Percy to be a child of Zeus—perhaps because she believed her mother couldn't get along with Poseidon, or maybe due to Thalia, or even because Zeus was known as the greatest whore in Greek mythology.

It made Luke feel exasperated.

But at least she was making an effort to get along with Percy, even offering to handle the Ancient Greek lessons with him—the boy clearly needed to be taught; he was dangerously uninformed and sassy, a risky combination.

In Luke's opinion, she was doing this both to settle his nagging and to find out if Percy was 'the one' in one fell swoop.

*Quite crafty,* he thought with amusement.

Obviously, he wasn't about to trust a kid to do his job better than he could, so Luke occasionally sat down with Percy and taught him himself. More importantly, though, he used the time to check on the boy, trying to make him feel welcome while also encouraging him to make some friends, at least within Cabin Eleven.

Percy seemed lonely, and it was not good to deal with grief alone—Luke knew this personally.

The kid, however, had different ideas and kept asking about the Underworld—as discreetly as he could, of course, which wasn't discreet at all. Given what had happened to Sally Jackson and knowing Percy would eventually end up 'visiting' Hades' realm, Luke shared what he knew and even combed through the Camp libraries, Iris Messaging Kat when he needed more information.

Until she got annoyed by the constant Iris Messages and stopped answering his calls, that is.

After all that, Percy was as well-informed as he could be. Whether that would make a difference now depended on the boy himself.

*Everything will be fine, it has to,* Luke reassured himself yet again, clasping his hands together beneath his chin.

His musings were abruptly interrupted by the blare of the trumpet.

With a quiet huff, Luke stood, and the rest of Cabin Eleven followed his lead. Percy, standing close to him since he was the new kid, fumbled a bit more awkwardly, earning a few snickers from Luke's siblings—but one sharp glance from him was enough to shut them up.

Before long, Annabeth ran in with two of her brothers, carrying the Athena flag. On the other side of the Dining Pavilion, Clarisse and her sisters did the same with the Ares one.

As soon as the campers spotted them, they erupted into excited shouts so loud that Luke could barely hear his own thoughts.

Clapping with the other demigods as they cheered and applauded, Luke felt a pang of nostalgia. The scene reminded him of the Capture the Flag game he had participated in as a new camper, when the Athena and Ares cabins had led the teams just like now.

Now, he was the counselor, and those campers he had once competed with were either dead or living in the ordinary, *peaceful* mortal world.

*Aside from one,* he thought, casting a fleeting glance at the Apollo table.

"Are those the flags?" Percy's shout snapped Luke out of his melancholy and back to reality.

"Yeah." Anticipating the kid's next question from his expression, Luke added, "Cabins Five and Six often lead the teams, but not always." Smirking, he continued playfully, "I'm sure you can guess why."

Smiling a little, Percy replied, "Yeah, I can." Then he furrowed his brows in thought and asked, "But what happens if another cabin captures the flag? Do you just paint it again?"

"You'll find out when we get the flag, kid." Luke said confidently, shifting his focus to the two leading girls. They were standing on either side of Chiron, who was speaking to them in hushed tones—probably going over the team lineups.

"Which side are we on?"

Luke eyed the boy, weighing whether to answer since Chiron was about to announce the teams, but decided to go ahead anyway. "This time, we're siding with Cabin Six to take the flag from the children of War."

Percy nodded, though his expression still showed he had more questions. Before he could voice them, however, Chiron began announcing the teams.

As he had mentioned to Percy, Hermes had allied with Athena. Apollo, being the second-largest cabin, was also a strong addition, and Dionysus—the cabin of his cousins, as Uncle D had introduced them when they finally arrived at Camp—had simply followed Luke.

The twins were good athletes—perhaps they should team up with Percy? It was something he would need to discuss with the other cabin leaders.

It was certainly a better approach than Annabeth's idea to have the kid patrol the border alone to lure Clarisse into a distraction.

"How are the alliances decided?" Percy whispered.

"We trade privileges—shower times, chores, that sort of thing. We decide on our own; it's an important skill to learn, knowing how to deal with people." Luke whispered back, internally acknowledging that he always squeezed every bit of advantage out of alliance-seekers before agreeing to support them.

Well, he had to manage the largest cabin, so he didn't think it was particularly unfair to negotiate the best deal for his brats. In his mind, it made perfect sense; given their sheer

numbers, it was only fair that they received a corresponding return for their support.

With a thoughtful expression, Percy slowly nodded, his gaze flitting to the other cabins as the Ares team was announced.

Clarisse had allied with the remaining cabins—Aphrodite, which was expected, as well as Hephaestus and Demeter. She had also tried to recruit him for her side, but as he had explained to her, he had already joined her last time, and this time it was Annabeth's turn. Besides, Annie had negotiated the better deal—which made him proud.

It was always good to see his brats growing up.

In any case, Clarisse got grumpy but also way too eager to pit herself against his team—the girl was too much like Peter sometimes, or was it an Ares thing?

Suddenly, Chiron struck the ground with his hooves, capturing everyone's attention, and began to announce the rules—rules Luke had unwillingly etched into his memory after nearly a decade of hearing them week after week.

He let his mind wander while the centaur droned on about things he already knew, until Chiron finally extended his hand, making all sorts of equipment appear on the tables.

"Wow!" Percy exclaimed, his green eyes shining with wonder. "Do we really need to use this?"

Unable to hide his amusement at the kid's astonishment, Luke replied, "Of course. We don't want to get seriously hurt, do we?" He walked over to the pile of gear, sifting through it before pulling out a shield and sword that seemed the right size for Percy, along with a few pieces of Greek armor and, of course, the blue-plumed helmet of their team. Handing them over to the kid, he added, "These should do. Chiron figured they'd be a good fit for you."

Awkwardly, the boy stared at Luke, a lost expression on his face as he struggled to hold all of his gear, the shield already slipping to the ground.

Sighing, he motioned for Percy to hand over the equipment and proceeded to show him how to properly gear up. The boy's face flushed with embarrassment at being helped, but Luke, rolling his eyes internally, was relieved that he didn't make a fuss about it.

"What's my role?" Percy suddenly asked, shifting on his feet as Luke adjusted the armor a final time.

Glancing at the kid, Luke straightened up and smiled, pointing at the two blonde children of Dionysus a short distance away. "Well, I think you should stick close to the Cabin Twelve twins. Maybe do some patrolling along the borders?" *Preferably in the less chaotic parts.*

Percy made a face as he followed Luke's finger to the two boys but eventually nodded in agreement.

Ruffling the boy's hair, Luke quickly grabbed his gear and armed himself, just as Annabeth shouted, "Blue team, forward!"

Ignoring the other campers, who were clapping and waving their swords around like a pack of unruly baboons, Luke moved toward Annabeth, gesturing for Castor and Pollux to join him. Percy followed closely behind, and Luke caught a glimpse of Lee heading in the same direction out of the corner of his eye.

When he reached Annabeth, he found her scowling at Clarisse from a distance, who was sneering back at her. As the teams split and the red team moved north, taunting Luke's side, both girls sharply turned away from each other.

*Ah, good old friendly rivalry,* he thought, well accustomed to their antics by now.

"Annie." He greeted, matching her pace effortlessly. He observed that Percy, however, was having trouble keeping up under the weight of his equipment.

"Luke." She said, then glanced over her shoulder at Percy and added, "And…Percy."

Noting her puzzled look, Luke smiled innocently and suggested, as the twins and Lee joined them, "Perhaps we should go over the plan again? Just to clarify everyone's roles."

With a skeptical glance—ah, the woes of familiarity; she knew him too well—Annabeth agreed, "Fine, we can go over it again to make sure everyone knows what to do."

"To start with, I'll be the one to get the flag, since I'm the fastest." Luke said.

"And I'll be the one covering your back." Lee added, flashing him a smile.

"We'll handle border patrol." Pollux continued, with Castor nodding in agreement.

Turning to Percy, Annabeth pointedly asked, "And you? What did Luke decide you'd be doing?"

The boy hesitated, glancing at Luke, who gave him an encouraging nod, then replied, "Border patrol, with the twins."

"Oh man, don't worry. We'll show you the ropes." Pollux said with a reassuring smile, probably sensing Percy's unease.

Furrowing her brows, Annabeth shot a glance at Luke, who merely smiled and waited for her to speak first.

After a moment of silence, with a million plans and adjustments flickering behind her gray eyes, Annie spoke, "It's an easy enough job. Stay close to the stream and keep the reds away. I'll show you the space you'll be guarding." Casting a brief glance at Luke, she added, "Don't worry, the Owl-Eyed always has a plan."

So the strategy hadn't changed: Percy would remain the bait.

At least Luke had arranged for some bodyguards to watch over the boy, minimizing the risk of getting hurt—especially with Clarisse still fuming over the bathroom incident, despite their little *talk*.

In Luke's opinion, that had been her own fault, so she had no right to be angry.

But that was the least of his worries.

Casting a glance at the forest as they ventured deeper, he wondered if the thief was inside Camp or if there were any spies present. And if so, would the monster summoning still occur?

“Be careful of Clarisse’s spear; it discharges electricity.” Castor’s voice reached Luke. Casting a glance over his shoulders, he saw that his cousins had moved to flank the boy.

He smiled slightly at the sight, pleased to see them getting along.

However, his satisfaction was short-lived, as Annabeth soon pointed out the area the trio would be guarding.

It was at the edge of their territory, where a shallow stream flowed over some rocks. The area was very exposed, making the kids easily visible from the enemy side.

It was dangerous—*too dangerous*—especially since he wasn’t sure if there were any wild hellhounds sniffing around.

The only thing that eased his anxiety a bit was knowing he had stationed his own hellhound to guard the forest. However, the dog wasn’t in the area where Capture the Flag was taking place, since Chiron had prohibited him from interfering in the competition—something about unfairness, which made no sense since not everyone had magical weapons and *those* weren’t banned.

“How about making them stay over there?” Luke suggested, pointing to a hill in the distance. It was covered with a few trees and rocks, offering some cover while remaining close to the water and on the edge of the area.

In essence, it was more easily defended and still within sight of the enemy. Plus, it was closer to their teammates than Annabeth’s suggested spot.

Annabeth fixed him with an annoyed stare, and he raised an eyebrow in response—there was no way he’d risk his charges with unnecessary danger. She quickly surveyed the spot he pointed out, then glanced toward the enemy’s side. After a brief pause to gather her thoughts, she nodded, signaling for them to move to the new location.

Once there, Luke turned to face the boys and whispered, raising a finger, “Remember: if things start to get out of control, retreat into the forest. The Stolls and Ethan are stationed nearby, so head for them.”

Satisfied with their nods, Luke signaled for Lee to follow and broke away from the group. Just in time, as the trumpet announcing the start of the competition blared.

They moved through the woods quietly and carefully—at least Luke did, though Lee, not so much.

“This takes me back to my first Capture the Flag. We were with Axel, and somehow, we actually grabbed the flag.” Lee said, his voice loud and steps even louder as he reminisced, a dopey grin on his face. He slung an arm over Luke’s shoulders, leaning in with a bright smile. “Now look at us, back at it again.”

"Yeah, yeah.” Luke replied with a roll of his eyes, pushing Lee’s face away with his hand. "Now back off a bit, will you?”

Pouting but obeying, his friend leaned back and stood to his full height, though he kept talking—Lee’s habit of chattering nonstop, even when silence was needed, hadn’t changed since he was a tiny eight-year-old.

Luke glanced at his friend from the corner of his eye, silently acknowledging that Lee certainly wasn’t tiny anymore. In fact, he was now taller and broader than Luke, which wasn’t much of a surprise at all.

*At least, that makes him a good shield.*

Keeping one ear tuned to Lee’s chatter and the other alert for any enemies, Luke advanced through the opposing team's territory. It struck him as odd that they hadn’t encountered a single demigod yet.

Maybe Clarisse had already gone after Percy, and knowing her, she probably took quite a few of her siblings with her. If so, her defense of her team’s flag would be weaker and easier to breach, since her siblings were among the best warriors they had.

And he wasn’t about to complain about her lack of self-control, as it made his job significantly easier. Besides, it might serve as a lesson for her and achieve what he hadn’t been able to do: drill that lesson into her stubborn head.

Suddenly, a noise to his right snapped his attention, but the constant stream of Lee’s chatter made it hard to hear clearly.

“Lee.” Luke abruptly stopped, scanned their surroundings, and called his friend, who turned to him. After a brief, assessing look that made Lee shift on his feet, he declared, “You talk too much.”

Instantly, Lee’s enthusiasm dimmed like a setting sun, leaving him looking like a kicked puppy, which made Luke feel a pang of guilt.

But the feeling didn’t last long, as he heard the sound again—many voices fast approaching their position. Cursing under his breath, he scanned the area until he spotted a thick mass of thorny bushes, which people typically avoid.

Luke urgently shoved Lee toward the bushes, then dropped to the ground behind them. He dragged his friend down with him, who grunted at the thorns but quieted when Luke covered his mouth.

Before long, a group of campers passed by, one of whom was a Demeter girl who scanned the area with a frown. Her presence was problematic, given their hiding spot in the bushes—which she could potentially control if she spotted them, something that would complicate things very, *very* quickly. After a tense moment of searching, she turned to the others and said with a huff, “I don’t see anything. Are you sure you heard something?”

"I did!" A boy from the Aphrodite cabin exclaimed, his voice indignant. "I heard a voice coming from this direction."

Narrowing his eyes, Luke counted the demigods: three in total. The third was another child of Cabin Ten, which was a relief. If there had been two from Cabin Four, it would have meant instant defeat.

“Well, as you can see, there’s nothing here. Let’s head back.” The girl replied gruffly before turning to leave while her companions grumbled in protest.

Holding his breath, Luke watched as they moved away, slowly relaxing and finally removing his hand from Lee’s mouth. They stayed crouched for a moment longer, waiting until Luke was certain the danger had passed. Then, rising cautiously, he scanned the area once more.

Seeing the coast was clear, he gestured for Lee to get up.

“Be quiet.” He hissed quietly to the other man, who nodded with a sheepish expression that made Luke roll his eyes in exasperation.

Carefully, he advanced through enemy territory, pausing at every unfamiliar sound. Lee followed, attempting to mimic his movements with little success, though at least it was quieter than before.

Luke had a pretty good idea where the flag would be; the Ares team had a habit of placing it in the same spot—on top of a massive rock. It was stupid and predictable, but those little brutes always seemed to treat their losses like a personal challenge, as if it were a matter of honor or something Luke didn’t even try to understand. And, to be fair, he couldn’t really call it unproductive, since they won plenty of the time too.

Suddenly, something set off alarm bells in his head, causing him to pause briefly before shoving Lee aside just in time as roots shot out from the ground where they had just been standing.

“I told you!” The same son of Aphrodite’s voice called out, emerging from behind some trees with a victorious grin alongside his sister. “I *did* hear something.”

*A trap.*

“So you did.” The Demeter girl—Chloe, he recognized—replied, her face etched with concentration as she slowly emerged, hands raised. Narrowing her eyes at Luke, she snapped her hands forward and ordered sharply, “Alina, go call one of my siblings! We can’t hold Luke down with just me!”

Cursing under his breath, Luke instantly dodged the vines and roots shooting from the ground, which attempted to entangle his legs.

*This* was exactly why he hated fighting those tree-huggers—they always tried to pin him down.

Running around and staying constantly on the move, Luke's eyes shifted between the fleeing Aphrodite girl, the boy trying to distract Lee, and the Demeter girl, who was sweating and clearly struggling to both catch him and support her teammate.

With his mind racing, he shouted to Lee, "Intercept Alina! Now!"

Immediately, Chloe narrowed her eyes and shifted her focus to restrain Lee, who had already knocked the boy down and was now free to pursue Alina, leaving herself less able to concentrate on the real threat: Luke.

And that split moment of distraction was all Luke needed.

With fewer plants trying to trip him, he charged forward, slamming his shoulder into Chloe's torso and sending her sprawling to the ground. Hastily, he drove his knee into her belly to pin her down, drawing his sword in one fluid motion and pressing the blade against her throat.

"Yield." He intoned calmly, disregarding the plants curling around his heel.

For a moment, it seemed like she might ignore him, but then Lee appeared, dragging Alina behind him by the scruff of her shirt as if she were an unruly kitten, while her brother followed, looking decidedly grumpy.

Chloe turned her head to take in the scene with a dumbfounded look, then sighed heavily before shooting him a disgruntled glance and grumbling, "I yield."

As the plants retreated from his ankle with her surrender, Luke stood up and extended a hand to the defeated girl, who took it with a resigned expression.

"That was a good plan." He praised lightly. "Who came up with it?"

Puffing out his chest a bit, the boy—Kevin—raised his hand, looking more appeased now that his contribution had been acknowledged.

"Well, it was clever to set up an ambush knowing we'd be coming for the flag." Luke said, noting the boy's smug expression. He then shifted to criticism. "But you should have kept your distance when dealing with Lee. He's bigger and better in close combat than you. You could have leveraged your strengths more, perhaps by manipulating the situation to your advantage."

Ignoring the boy's embarrassed reaction, Luke glanced at the other Aphrodite brat, scrutinizing her for a moment and making her shift uncomfortably. Ultimately, though, he found no fault with her; she had done her role, and any failure was not her responsibility.

Finally, he turned back to Chloe and advised, “You should have focused on pinning me down instead of going after Lee. I’m faster than he is, and keeping me occupied would have bought you more time.”

“But then he might have come after me.”

“Yes, but even so, Alina would have been out there and could have alerted the others in the meantime.” He countered, glancing over the three kids. They were a bit scraped up but not seriously injured—he and Lee had made sure to go easy on them.

“I see.” Chloe said, her brows furrowing in thought. She then smiled, her demeanor lightening now that she was out of the competition. “Thanks for the advice, Luke. I’ll keep it in mind.” Her expression grew determined as she added, “Next time, I’ll win!”

“I’m not so sure about that.” Luke replied with a hint of a smirk. Shaking his head at her indignation, he turned to the three children, clapping his hands. "Since I’ve won, you three will pretend I knocked you out."

They obeyed without a word, which was always a relief—Luke hated having to rough up kids. Unfortunately, some were more stubborn than others, especially the Ares lot. Those little hellions acted like every fight was life or death, never backing down without a, frankly, exhausting struggle.

Gesturing for Lee to follow, he waved goodbye to the kids with a playful warning, signaling that he was keeping an eye on them.

Soon, they were back to navigating the forest, encountering no more trouble.

Moving quietly as they neared the heart of enemy territory, Luke kept a sharp lookout for any potential ambushes. However, by skirting the edges of the forest, he saw no more defending demigods—likely because most of them were focused on guarding more central areas, which worked to his advantage.

He was going to seize the flag from the flanks, after all.

After covering some distance, he motioned for his friend to slow down, recognizing the area. Crouching low, he moved as stealthily as possible—Lee following behind—making his way toward their target with practiced ease.

Quickly, he slipped behind a tree, with Lee following suit and hiding behind a nearby trunk. Peeking ahead, Luke saw that the flag was prominently positioned atop one of the rocks in the center of a stone circle. As he scanned the area, he observed two campers guarding it—both children of Hephaestus, big, burly, and strong, and certainly not what one would call pretty.

Thankfully, the guards had their backs turned.

Signaling for Lee to stay put, Luke crept toward his target, keeping low to the ground.

Just as he reached it—and as his shitty luck would have it—one of the two demigods turned around.

With wide eyes, the boy stared at him for a moment too long, allowing him to snatch the flag and make a run for it. The moment Luke made his move, however, the brat screamed in a shrill voice, “Intruder! He got the flag!”

He wasted no time, dashing straight to the edge of the territory while trusting Lee to cover his back.

Soon, his cabin-mates and more Apollo campers who had infiltrated the enemy’s area appeared, helping him escape while fending off opponents.

As he neared the stream separating the two teams, the screams grew louder, drawing the attention of several Ares campers—including Clarisse, he noted with a distracted glance—who had gathered around the battered Percy and twins.

“A trap! It was a trap!” Clarisse screamed in outrage before urging her siblings to follow her as she rushed after him.

But it was too late.

Luke crossed the stream, and as soon as he did, his teammates erupted in cheers. The flag in his hands shimmered, changing from blood red to silver as a caduceus replaced the Ares boar.

Smiling slightly at the celebration around him as he tried to catch his breath, Luke suddenly found himself lifted onto someone’s shoulders. Looking down, he saw the familiar face of a grinning Lee.

Accepting his fate, Luke half-heartedly waved the flag as his teammates shouted and chanted his name. He observed the growing crowd of demigods, though he couldn’t help but notice that a few particular individuals were missing.

Soon after, Chiron galloped out of the woods and blew the horn, signaling that the competition was over, which only made the cheers grow louder.

Luke tugged on Lee’s hair to get his attention and signaled that he wanted to be let down. As he descended, he scanned the area, looking for Percy, Annie and his cousins, who were missing from the group.

Spotting the boy being supported by Annabeth and the twins standing close by them, Luke's attention was draw to the forest behind them, sensing something was wrong.

Suddenly, a growl echoed through the area, instantly silencing everyone.

Chiron cursed in Ancient Greek as he drew his bow, then urged the demigods to prepare themselves. However, his efforts met little success as they all stood frozen in surprise at the sight before them.

Standing behind the kids was an immense hellhound, its lips curled in a vicious snarl, revealing sharp fangs.

This wasn't Luke's hellhound.

Time seemed to pause for a moment before the monster locked eyes with Percy.

Then it charged at the boy with bared teeth, leaping over Annabeth as she tried to block its path. It violently threw Pollux and Castor aside when they tried to intervene, before slamming into Percy and pushing him into the ground.

*Where the hell is Pipo?* Luke thought desperately, tossing the flag aside and rushing to the kids as fast as he could.

He could only focus on the boy—the child under his care; *Percy*—trapped beneath the monster's paw, with his torso turning red as the claws tore through his armor like paper.

Levi's weak voice echoed in his ears, the memory of the blood and entrails blinding Luke for a moment as desperation urged him to *move, move, move.*

A howl cut through the distress clouding his mind just as a massive black blur shot out of the forest and collided with the wild hellhound.

*Thank God. Pipo is here.*

The dogs snarled and clawed at each other until Pipo's jaws latched onto the other hellhound's neck. He violently shook his head from side to side, causing the other dog to choke and whimper in pain as it desperately tried to break free.

It did not have the chance.

Rushing to Percy's side, Luke watched as dozens of arrows arced overhead and struck the wild hellhound, piercing its body and leaving it brimming with projectiles like a pincushion before it began to slowly dissolve.

As soon as Pipo dropped the lifeless hellhound from his jaws, Lee rushed over, with Chiron and Annabeth close behind him.

"By the gods!" Annie exclaimed, her face filled with fear. "That hellhound… it shouldn't be here. The only hellhound we have at Camp is Luke's dog."

With a somber expression, Chiron surveyed the frightened demigods and said gravely, "Someone summoned it. Someone from inside Camp."

Ignoring the cacophony of voices that erupted after the centaur's declaration, Luke examined Percy's wounds with a worried frown, while Lee knelt beside them, his expression serious. The boy was pale, his breathing shallow and each breath seeming to cause him pain, but he was alert, his eyes moving from Luke to the campers and then to the hellhound being absorbed by the earth.

*Broken ribs, possibly a punctured lung, and he's losing blood, but he won't die,* he thought with relief, feeling something lift from his chest, *Percy just needs healing… water, he needs to get to the water.*

"You're hurt." Annabeth addressed Percy seriously, her gray eyes narrowing in thought for a moment before she turned to Luke and added, "Quick, Luke, get him to the water."

"Water?" Lee exclaimed. "He needs healing!"

"Just watch." Annabeth retorted, turning back to Luke with an urgent look in her eyes. "Take him to the water."

Not needing any more incentive, since he had the same idea, Luke lifted the boy in his arms, ignoring his weak protests, and hurried to the stream as quickly as he could.

Behind him, Annabeth called out, "Chiron, you need to see this," as Luke crouched and carefully lowered Percy into the water.

As soon as he made contact with the stream, the boy's color began to return, the bleeding slowed to a stop, and the cuts on his chest began to heal gradually.

A bright light suddenly surged above the boy's head, making the campers gasp in surprise, their eyes wide as the least expected symbol rotated in the air.

It was a green trident. Poseidon had claimed his son.

And plunged them all into a future of chaos.

Percy, however, didn't seem to notice, stuttering out confused apologies to the surrounding demigods as they stared in growing horror at the glowing sign above his head.

"Percy." Luke whispered. "Look up."

The boy complied, furrowing his brows in bemusement as he stared up at the symbol just as it began to fade.

With a grim look, Annabeth muttered, "Your father. This is *really* bad."

"It is determined." Chiron's voice rang out with gravity.

Taking the cue, Luke knelt with the others, watching as Percy observed everything with a perplexed expression, his eyes wide and shoulders tense.

"My father?"

"Poseidon." Chiron announced. "Earthshaker. Stormbringer. Father of Horses. Hail, Perseus Jackson, son of the Sea God."

Chapter End Notes

Luke is being a mama bird once again, lol.

He's trying to help Percy with information while struggling to make plans for the future. First off, Percy did not do border patrol alone; Luke has an agenda™ to get the kid some more friends—since he gets kinda isolated in the beginning—and it has the benefit of helping lessen the risk of injury (there were five Ares children after him, Clarisse had an electric spear, and Percy is THE newbie at Camp—he's the knows-nothing guy). Annabeth got annoyed, certainly, but since it did not significantly impair her plans, she did not protest—and she was also trying to gauge Percy's godly parent, so she was definitely using the invisible cap to spy.

As for the Clarisse bathroom incident, it was similar but slightly different from canon. I imagine she went to rib on Annabeth, and they traded insults. Then she noticed Percy and said something unflattering. Since Percy can't keep his mouth shut, he shot back, which made her mad and led to the bathroom incident. Luke did go to admonish her and even used the secret weapon to make her listen—Peter (he's alive, don't worry). Unfortunately, Cabin Five's 'honor' was slighted, so Clarisse is going to regain it, lol.

The Capture the Flag event had Luke reminiscing about when he was a newbie, with some parallels sprinkled in. As for Lee, he's still the sunny boy, just a big sunny boy now—and the head counselor. And Pipo is here, full-grown, and certainly living up to his name of Pipo the Dangerous.

In any case, thanks for reading! Comments are always appreciated! And it doesn't matter if you're late to the party!

How do you think Mr. D will react to his sons being kind of friends with Percy?

# Chapter 32: TLT - Pariah

Chapter Summary

Luke, the number one defender of Big Three children's rights

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"So, Lucy, I hear you've been giving the son of good old Barnacle Beard some private lessons." Mr. D drawled.

Both of them were seated at a table on the porch, looking out over the Camp. It was a beautiful day with clear skies and a peaceful exterior, but that peace was only superficial.

After all, Percy's claiming had serious repercussions for the Camp, the gods, and the boy himself.

Glancing sideways at his uncle, who was sipping his drink and playing pinochle with invisible players, Luke answered simply, "Yes, the kid needs it."

Uncle D hummed softly as he placed a card on the table and retorted, "Indeed, but to the extent of having private lessons with the swordsmanship instructor?"

"The others don't want to share any activities with him."

Since the claiming, the other campers had kept their distance from Percy.

The appearance of a Big Three child and the invasion of a wild hellhound from the depths of Hades' realm at Camp—*where it was supposed to be safe*—on the same day had left everyone feeling frightened.

A new 'forbidden child' they were calling the boy.

Which was ridiculous; Percy was not at fault for any of this. He simply… existed, and that was no more his fault than their own existence was theirs.

But it wasn't unexpected. Sadly, Luke had already predicted it would come to this.

At least his efforts to get the kid some friends had paid off. Percy had gained the support of a few campers, including the Cabin Twelve twins and even a couple of Luke's little hellions.

The ones who weren't jealous of the attention he was giving the child, that is.

“And that’s the kid’s problem, not yours.” His uncle said nonchalantly, clicking his tongue slightly as one of the invisible players won the round. “He’s in Cabin Three now, you’re not his counselor anymore.”

“He needs someone to help him; nobody taught him the basics, and now he’s under everyone’s scrutiny while being avoided.” Luke argued, casting a sidelong glance at the god—though his uncle, of course, didn’t bother acknowledging it. After a moment, he amended, “Not everyone. The twins help him where they can.”

"Ah, yes." Mr. D's expression twisted with displeasure. "My sons getting close to Peter Johnson. *Marvelous*."

“His name is Percy Jackson, Uncle.” Luke corrected, a hint of exasperation slipping through.

“Whatever.” His uncle waved his hand dismissively before letting out a triumphant sound as he won the game—not that Luke found it impressive, given that the god’s opponents weren’t even real.

“*I* think it’s a good thing they’re getting along.”

“Good?” Mr. D scoffed as he shuffled the cards. “More like troublesome. That’s what it is.”

“Uncle, I know you don’t like him. But the kid didn’t do anything to deserve this.”

“Not that we know of. He hasn’t done anything we know of *yet*.”

Luke subtly rolled his eyes. "Maybe he really hasn’t caused any trouble at all, and everyone’s just being paranoid and unfair to him because of who his father is."

“His parentage is more than reason enough.” His uncle said as he started a new round. Pressing his lips together, he added, “Having him here, especially now, is anything but good.”

Furrowing his brows, Luke remained silent. He wasn’t supposed to know what was happening, but, even so, he understood the implications of his uncle’s words well enough. The fact that a child of Poseidon had been claimed after the King’s master bolt was stolen made him the prime suspect for the theft, in Zeus's eyes.

Then there was the prophecy…

“Besides,” Mr. D said, clicking his tongue, “that child is destined to suffer. Broken oaths always have terrible consequences, often affecting the innocent more than the guilty. Maybe it *would* be kinder to get rid of him now.”

The memory of a lightning bolt striking the ground and a pine tree growing from the spot where Thalia’s body had fallen flashed through Luke’s mind.

“Uncle, you don’t actually believe that.” He countered, frowning at the god with disapproval.

Mr. D paused, turned to face him, and studied him carefully before saying, “Maybe, maybe not.” Then, returning to his cards, he added, “But the fact remains: that boy is dangerous.”

“He’s a child.”

“He won’t be one forever.” His uncle shot back. Then he sighed heavily, placing his cards on the table and apparently causing the invisible players to vanish, as their cards tumbled in a scattered heap. “There are many factors at play, Luke, and things are only going to get even more complicated if that child is allowed to live.”

“But to sacrifice a boy who’s done nothing wrong? Simply because he was born to the wrong parents?” Luke pressed, his brow furrowing.

“You don’t know everything, Luke.”

Luke *knew*, perhaps even more than Mr. D did.

With a frown, he locked eyes with his uncle and countered sharply, “Uncle, you’re Dionysus Agyieus, the protector. Dionysus Eleuthereus, the liberator. Why not give the boy a chance?”

Mr. D’s eyes flared purple as his form shimmered, gradually shifting into an androgynous, horned young man.

*Power.*

The scent of grapes filled his nostrils as phantoms flickered at the edge of his vision, vanishing whenever he turned to look. The promise of ecstasy washed over him, flooding his chest with euphoria, as if he were being slowly intoxicated.

Beneath the joy, a hint of *frenzy* stirred.

“I am also Anthroporraestus, the man-slayer.”

Pursing his lips, Luke remained silent, taking slow, deliberate breaths to maintain his composure under the weight of his uncle’s power.

After years of contact with Mr. D, Luke had become familiar with the god’s aura. It didn’t affect him as much now, partly due to the exposure therapy Dionysus had subjected him to, making him more accustomed to it.

It didn’t solve the problem, but it made it more tolerable. Even so, both the god and his grandma remained puzzled by his... condition, for lack of a better word.

Suddenly, the sensation stopped.

With a heavy sigh, his uncle’s form slowly reverted to that of the familiar, fat camp director.

“This situation is out of my hands.” Mr. D announced, settling his aura and summoning some chocolate, which he handed to Luke as a peace offering—something he, of course, accepted. “The gods are still debating what to do with him, and there have been a lot of emergency meetings lately. They’ve talked about getting rid of him, but there’s no agreement yet, especially since no one wants to anger Poseidon.”

Taking a bite of his snack, Luke glanced briefly at the god before shifting his gaze to the Camp, his face set in a displeased frown.

After a pause, he muttered, “It’s not fair. He’s just a little kid.”

“How much do you know about what’s going on, Lucy?” Mr. D asked, his tone casual but his eyes were knowing.

Munching to buy more time as he weighed his response, Luke said carefully, “I’ve heard there’s been talk of something being stolen. Then there was that storm on the winter solstice, and the weather’s been strange ever since.”

His uncle hummed, turning to look at the horizon as well.

“Then you can probably guess the reason, but I’ll spell it out for you.” He drawled. “The King of the Gods’ symbol of power was stolen, and Poseidon is the prime suspect. Of course, a god cannot steal another god’s symbol of power, not even your father. Which means…”

“That a mortal did it.”

Luke wondered why his uncle was telling him this after all this time, when no one was supposed to know about the theft—at least not the demigods, since the satyrs did.

Dean and Grover were acting way too shifty these days not to know something about it.

Of course, Luke knew as well, but he wasn’t supposed to, so he had to tread carefully to avoid revealing his own knowledge. Although he guessed he could always claim he had pieced things together from the clues or even that he had overheard the satyrs gossiping.

“Yes, and now we have a claimed child of the Lord of the Sea who wasn’t supposed to exist right here at Camp Half-Blood.” Mr. D twisted his lips, summoning his drink. “And, *luckily*, he’s close to my sons, too.”

Silently, Luke cast a sidelong glance at his uncle, his brows furrowed. “That’s not concrete evidence that the boy is the culprit.”

What was with the gods? Did they really believe that a twelve-year-old kid who had never even set foot in Camp and was completely clueless about everything could somehow infiltrate Olympus and steal the master bolt without anyone noticing?

In the books, it was Luke Castellan who pulled it off, and even he barely escaped, getting caught by Ares in the process. He was an adult, a veteran, and a child of Hermes—he had every advantage and still struggled to do it.

The idea that Percy of all people could have done it was so ridiculous it was almost unbelievable.

But someone did it, and Luke still had no idea who.

It made him anxious.

“It isn’t.” Mr. D conceded, sipping his Coke. “But it doesn’t prove he isn’t the culprit, either. In the end, the only thing that matters is that he’s a son of Poseidon.”

Unable to suppress a snort, Luke retorted, “What a way to determine guilt—by parentage.”

Humming thoughtfully, his uncle shot him a *look* and remarked, “You’re handling this revelation better than I expected.”

Luke took another bite of his chocolate and glanced away. “I’ve been mulling it over since the winter solstice.”

“I see.” Dionysus mused, a thoughtful look in his gaze. After a long pause, Mr. D finally broke the silence with a question. “Are you still having nightmares?”

He’d told his uncle about his dreams, but not everything.

He knew—*Luke knew*—he should’ve mentioned Kronos, but whenever he tried, the words slipped away, leaving him feeling lost.

Maybe, deep down, he wished—really hoped—that Kronos would give up and the nightmares would disappear if he ignored them long enough.

With a heavy sigh, Luke answered solemnly, “Yeah.”

“And are they still the same?”

Pressing his lips together, Luke studied Mr. D’s neutral expression for a moment, then confessed, averting his gaze. “Yes, they haven’t changed.”

His uncle’s aura brushed against him, gently pressing on his skin like a soft, warm blanket draped over his shoulders. Unconsciously, he relaxed as the tension he hadn’t realized was there slowly melted away.

“Are you doing any relaxing activities? Taking time for yourself?”

Still avoiding his uncle's gaze, Luke remained silent, deliberately taking another bite of his chocolate.

These days, he had been doing everything he could to assist Percy, from swordsmanship lessons to a Greek mythology boot camp, aiming to prepare him as thoroughly and quickly as possible. He was also brainstorming ways to support the boy on the quest he was sure was coming.

It was inevitable, really. That quest was a peace offering to Zeus, and as a son of Poseidon, Percy *had* to be the one to return the bolt.

As a result, Luke had little time to himself, especially since his brats had become even more difficult ever since he chose to help Percy. The additional stress was probably the reason why Luke’s night terrors were getting more frequent.

Honestly, he wasn't sure if it was because Kronos was becoming more active, if the stress was making him more susceptible, or a combination of both.

All he knew was that he wasn't sleeping well.

"Less so these days." Luke finally answered, his tone as diplomatic as he could manage.

Raising an eyebrow, Mr. D said, "Then maybe you should make more time for them. Activities like that will help you."

"Yes, Uncle…"

With a snort, his uncle glanced at him and waved one hand dismissively. "You're free to go. Do whatever it is you do when you're not surrounded by brats—especially that Peter Johnson. He can survive without you hovering for a few hours."

Sighing heavily, Luke sent a disgruntled look at the god but rose from his seat nonetheless.

As he reached the front porch steps, Mr. D called out to him one last time, his face etched with seriousness. "Luke, you know you can come to me for anything, right?"

Luke paused, turning to face the god with a frown. Slowly, he nodded. "I do."

Mr. D scrutinized him for a moment, his gaze sharp. "Do you?"

Furrowing his brows, Luke opened his mouth to respond, but his uncle's attention had already shifted back to his pinochle game.

*What was that about?* He wondered, staring at Mr. D for a brief moment before shaking his head and walking away, wandering aimlessly around Camp with no idea how to spend his 'me-time.'

He could head to the Arts & Crafts Center and try his hand at drawing or crafting something. Maybe even visit the Forge? He did have a project in mind, though it was more of a vague idea at this point—and, truth be told, he wasn't particularly skilled at forging either.

His gaze drifted over the kids running around until it landed on Percy by the lake.

Surprisingly, the boy wasn't alone—Chris and the Stolls were with him, though Luke couldn't quite figure out why, considering the Stolls didn't like Percy that much. He had a feeling something was going on and his first instinct was to head over and butt in, but Mr. D's words echoed in his mind, stopping him in his tracks.

Conflicted, Luke hesitated, standing frozen in place as he fought with himself about whether to head there or not.

On one hand, Chris was there and he got along well enough with Percy. On the other hand, he often struggled to keep up with Travis and Connor, who were now particularly eager to prank Percy for whatever reason.

With a sigh, he made his decision and walked away, casting one last glance before heading off.

He just had to trust that Chris could temper their little brothers' behavior.

As he continued his aimless wandering, Luke's thoughts kept circling back to the thief, Kronos, and Percy, even as he tried to think of ways to relax. With a frustrated sigh, he kicked the ground, contemplating whether taking a nap and calling it a day might be his best option.

*A nap…*

With a new idea in mind, he perked up and headed toward the Amphitheater, knowing it would be empty at this time.

Once there, he checked his pockets to be sure and walked to the center of the space, glancing up at the sun. He took a small prism, which he had… *acquired* from the Camp Store after all his friends had left years ago, and held it up, adjusting his hand until it created a rainbow.

Feeling very stingy about spending the little money he had, he tossed a golden drachma into the rainbow and declared, "Oh Iris, goddess of the rainbow, please accept my offering." As the coin shimmered and vanished into the air, he added, "Axel Dahl."

Soon, Luke was peering beyond the mist into a small, ordinary living room. On the sofa, wrapped in layers of blankets, was a man he recognized, his face marred by a large, ugly scar stretching across the right side.

And, of course, he was sleeping.

*What a surprise*.

"Axel." Luke called, but the older man didn't stir. Grumbling, he tried again, raising his voice, "Axel!"

Lethargically, his friend opened his eyes, blinking slowly as he turned his head. Without even bothering to sit up, he greeted him, "Tiny bird."

"I'm nineteen, Axel." Luke said, exasperation in his voice.

"Always will be tiny to me." Axel replied matter-of-factly. With a yawn, he asked, "Why the call?"

"Mr. D said I needed to take some time off to relax or something, and it's been a while since I last called you."

Humming in agreement, Axel stated, "Mr. D is wise. I agree."

"Not you too." Luke grumbled, giving the older man a disgruntled glance.

"You're not disagreeing."

Cursed be Axel for his perceptiveness.

“I *suppose* I’ve been a bit stressed out lately.” Luke drawled, lifting his chin slightly.

“I see.” His friend mused, his expression flat as he stared at him with those dead fish eyes of his.

After an awkward pause, Luke cleared his throat and added, “Well, there’s a new Big Three kid around here. So…”

Axel let out a sound of understanding, then, still wrapped in his blankets, sluggishly sat up.

“Troublesome times ahead.”

“For sure. I’m trying to help the kid, but no one makes it easy. It’s almost like he has some kind of sickness that everyone’s afraid of catching, so they all avoid him. It’s ridiculous—he’s just a kid with a father who shouldn’t have had him, not some sort of terrifying monster.” Luke rambled, his brows furrowing as he let his indignation show.

“Scared.” The older man declared.

Pausing, Luke huffed and conceded, “Yeah, they are. But still…”

“Broken oaths.”

He rolled his eyes and retorted, “But that isn’t his fault, is it?”

Axel gave him a flat look, sighed deeply, and reminded him, “Monster horde.”

“And that wasn’t the girl’s fault either.”

With a slightly exasperated expression, Axel replied, “Powerful. Dangerous. Stronger scent means more monsters.” Pressing his lips together, he hesitated before adding, “Gods.”

Breathing in deeply, Luke's irritation faded, and he muttered, “Yeah, that’s all true. I’m just... affected by something Mr. D said.”

Axel remained silent, staring at Luke, waiting for him to continue.

He sighed. “He mentioned how the gods were discussing what to do about the kid, even saying there was talk of getting rid of him.”

“Unfair.”

“Yeah, it is.” Luke whispered.

After a beat of silence, Axel declared suddenly, a thoughtful look on his face, “Weather’s been strange. Whose child is he?”

“A son of the Lord of the Sea.”

“Makes sense.” Axel stroked his chin. “The King’s angry, and so is the Flooder—too many storms.”

“Yeah, ever since the winter solstice, the weather’s been odd.”

“Winter solstice…” The older man mused. Glancing at Luke, he asked, “When was the boy claimed?”

Pausing, Luke studied his friend’s face before speaking. “A few days ago, during Capture the Flag. A hellhound appeared inside Camp and attacked him.”

Axel furrowed his brows, the faintest hint of shock visible to those who knew where to look.

After years of knowing him, Luke was—aside from his long-departed sister, may the Lord rest her soul—the only person who could really understand Axel’s subtle mannerisms, and he could usually read what the older man was feeling well enough.

Most of the time, at least.

“How? There are barriers.”

"Chiron suspects someone from inside Camp summoned it, and I’m forced to agree.” Luke explained, his expression grim as he lowered his voice.

With a pinched expression, Axel muttered, “Worrying.”

“No kidding.” Luke exhaled heavily, feeling the weight of his problems settle back onto his shoulders.

“It’s not the boy’s fault; he’s just an easy target.” Axel deduced. Locking eyes with Luke, he declared solemnly, “Something’s happening on Olympus.”

Silently, Luke pondered how to respond.

He had kept his mouth shut about it for so long that his first instinct was to play dumb. Besides, now that Mr. D had trusted him with information that could make the gods seem *weak*, he doubted his uncle would appreciate him sharing it, especially with things being so… volatile.

They were on the verge of war between gods, but it hadn’t reached the turning point.

*Yet*.

“It seems so.” Was what he settled on saying.

“Strange dreams.”

*What?*

“What do you mean, Axel?” Luke asked, trying to mask his agitation under a veneer of calm as he felt his body tense up.

Leaning back on the sofa and narrowing his eyes, Axel explained, “Artificial. A dreamscape not my own. I noticed right away.”

“And… what happened?”

“Powerful influence, but crude. Full of flaws. Tried to show me things. I negated it.”

*Negated it?* Luke thought with interest, his mind drifting to his own sleepless nights and the way his nightmares seemed to be getting worse.

"Did it stop?" He asked, a flicker of hope swelling in his chest at the thought that maybe, *just maybe,* Kronos' influence could be blocked, even if only for a moment.

Axel gave Luke a long, quiet look before finally nodding.

"Partly. It tried a few more times—disturbing dreams. Made a shield to block it. Mostly held... so far."

*A shield.*

"Do you think it can hold indefinitely?" Luke inquired as casually as he could manage, adding just a touch of curiosity to his tone.

“No.” Axel shook his head. “But should hold for a while, maybe until the entity gives up.”

A pity, but Luke couldn't complain. The fact that some protection existed at all was already a small miracle.

Briefly hesitating, he chose his words carefully. “That’s a very useful ability, especially for us demigods. Our dreams are rarely just dreams and can be... quite distressing.”

“Tiny bird has been having nightmares, I see.” Axel stated bluntly, ignoring everything Luke had just said.

Unable to hide his reaction, Luke’s eyes widened for a split second before he quickly composed himself. He cleared his throat and tried to downplay the situation. “No, it’s not exactly like that—”

“I think you can learn it.”

Luke’s mental gears came to a halt before abruptly shifting as he zeroed in on Axel’s announcement.

“Learn? Are you sure?”

Cozying deeper into his blankets, Axel appeared lost in thought before speaking. “Your father is also associated with dreams.” Then, quoting a Homeric Hymn, he added, “*She bore a son...*

*a bringer of dreams, a watcher by night.*"

That was true.

His father's caduceus was a magic wand that could both induce sleep and awaken people. Besides, as the Messenger and Herald of the gods, his father also presided over dreams of omen. So, the connection was there.

*However*, the real question was whether Luke would be able to actually learn it.

"But maybe I haven't inherited that part of him." He said with a sigh.

Luke had his doubts.

He had never shown any signs, and he rarely dreamed—if he did, he never remembered. When dreams did come, they were always those demigod visions warning him about something or other.

In truth, he had always been more adept at the practical aspects of his father's domains—a good speaker, a clever thief, and a skilled traveler.

But this…

At times like these, he thought of Abigail. Her interest in esoteric things made him wonder if she'd inherited just the Underworld side of their father or if there were other, equally… obscure aspects.

He wished she was here.

"Try it, and we'll see." Axel replied blandly, yawning once again.

"How?"

"I'll guide you. Share dreamscape."

Luke frowned and stared at Axel, who met his gaze with a deadpan expression. After a moment, he gave up and nodded.

Even so, his worry gnawed at him. *I'm not sure if it will work.*

Axel's voice cut through his spiraling thoughts before they could add to his stress.

"I saw Jack."

*What.*

Worry gave way to shock, which in turn bowed to the growing sense of indignation simmering beneath his skin.

"My brother? The one who vanished without a trace the moment he came of age, without a single word of goodbye? The one who never sent any news or even a word to let us know he

was alive?”

Yes, Luke was still mad about it.

Axel nodded and nonchalantly dropped the bombshell, “He got married.”

“*Married?*” Luke echoed, his tone laced with disbelief.

That Jack? The doormat? Luke couldn’t believe it—either it was a lie or whoever chose his brother had some peculiar tastes.

“You need to tell this story properly, Axel. Where did you see him?”

“Got hired to photograph a wedding. Turned out, he was the groom.” A small smile crept across Axel’s face. “Tried to run when he saw me.”

“I can’t believe it.” Luke shook his head. “And how’s he doing?”

“Seemed fine, happy. His wife’s a pretty lady—very... dominant.”

*So, the wife really has peculiar tastes,* he mused, letting out a quiet snort.

Still, Luke felt some comfort in knowing that at least one of his siblings had managed to find some sense of normalcy in life.

“I’m glad.”

He considered asking if his brother knew about Aubrey, but quickly brushed it aside. He didn’t want to bring up anything that might make either of them sad, not when Axel was clearly trying to distract him from his problems.

But Luke could still ask about his other problematic brother.

"Has he heard anything about Ed? Or you, for that matter?"

“Yes, the last I heard, Edward was working at a bar in a shady place.” Axel replied drowsily, blinking slowly.

*Probably involved in something illegal,* Luke thought with a huff, *at least it’s better than being homeless.*

Noticing how his friend was practically dozing off while sitting upright, Luke snorted softly. “Well, it was good talking to you, Axel. Let me know when you decide about starting my lessons.”

"Will come in a dream." Axel muttered with a lethargic drawl, slowly sinking back into the sofa.

"Alright then. Goodbye." Luke said with amusement.

After a muffled farewell from Axel, he ended the call and slipped the prism back into his pocket.

As Luke made his way back toward the cabins, the sound of brats screaming and running in chaotic circles greeting him, he supposed Mr. D had been right after all.

He really had needed some time to himself.

With a calmer disposition and a clearer mind, Luke's worries seemed less daunting.

He even felt less anxious about Kronos now that Axel had shared the information about the shield thing with him.

Now, he just needed to figure out what to prepare for Percy's future quest.

*And,* he thought as he entered his cabin and scanned the gathered siblings and unclaimed with a heavy heart, *find out who the enemy agent is.*

Chapter End Notes

So, after nearly a decade, we can say Luke finally got comfortable with Mr. D—comfortable enough that he can argue with him without fearing some kind of punishment. Even so, he's still a cagey man, so he didn't tell Dionysus about Kronos when he really should have. And here's the big question: is Mr. D fooled by it? Does he know something?

On another note, Mr. D doesn't like his sons getting close to the problem child that is Percy. Especially with this talk of the thief and prophecy, it means trouble. And yes, the gods are really talking about eliminating a child; the only thing holding them back is Poseidon's rage and the possibility of war.

Besides all that, it was interesting writing the difference in information the characters had and how Luke was navigating it all. He knows what's going on, but nobody told him, so he has to act like he doesn't. Then there's Mr. D, who knows but isn't going to be the one telling the demigods due to the whole hiding the gods' weaknesses and such. Then there's Axel, who somewhat figured it out, though not even close to everything, and the other campers who don't know anything but sense the change in the air.

Percy is isolated now. That's why Luke was pushing for him to make friends, due to the whole 'forbidden child' thing and how it would do exactly what it's doing—make the kid a pariah.

And Axel is back! His powers as a son of Hypnos are interesting. I think he would know how to wiggle out of Kronos' influence since, for all that the Titan is—well, a Titan—he's just a disembodied voice right now, and his domains have nothing to do with sleep or dreams. It's harvest and time (the kind that devours everything and is inevitable). So,

he’s brute-forcing things, and it works well enough, but children of Hypnos specialize in sleep and related stuff, and I imagine their father is kind of low-key helping. There are also some updates on Luke’s older brothers here (finally some good news for the poor guy), as well as some talk of magic.

In any case, thanks for reading! Comments are always appreciated! And it doesn’t matter if you’re late to the party!

Do you guys think Luke will learn a new power, or that it will be a failure?

# Chapter 33: TLT - Peace Offering

Chapter Summary

Luke is friendzoning Lee while Inês searches for another victim before a storm invades Camp and ruins the lighthearted mood.

*Percy's quest has arrived.*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Eu vou sentar[1]," Luke singsonged to himself, sat on a stone bench with Inês as they both contented themselves in passing the time by people watching.

Actually, she was keeping an eye on a few boys playing basketball—*probably searching for another victim,* Luke thought.

With a theatrical gasp, Inês turned to face him and exclaimed, "Lucas! That's not very demure of you."

"I didn't know that the simple act of sitting was considered such a vulgar action," he remarked, giving her a sidelong glance. Then, with a hint of teasing in his voice, he added, "How dirty-minded of you..."

Raising her eyebrows, Inês shot him a sassy once-over before harrumphing and turning her attention back to the front.

Snorting, Luke shook his head and refocused on the common area as well.

It was a spacious area, roughly the size of a soccer field, featuring a central campfire where Lady Hestia often appeared—a sight more frequent than not. Greek statues were scattered around, alongside fountains and meticulously maintained flower beds. But what really caught their attention were the two basketball hoops, where several boys from all the cabins, including Lee, he noted absentmindedly, were playing.

Perhaps sensing the weight of their combined gaze, Lee turned around, his face lighting up—Luke could see it brighten even from a distance—and he smiled and waved at them before returning his focus to the game.

Inês hummed suggestively, but before she could say anything stupid—and he was sure it was going to be stupid—he spoke first.

"*Don't* start, lady."

"Start what?" she asked, batting her eyelashes innocently.

Rolling his eyes, Luke shot back, "You know exactly what, Inês."

"How rude," Inês enunciated airily, tilting her head in an exaggerated, artful manner as she glanced at him. The teasing glint in her eye already giving away what was coming. "I just thought I'd mention, if you're looking for something to sit on, that golden-haired sunny man might be more than happy to… *offer* himself as your seat."

Luke's eyes widened as he snapped his head toward his friend, who smiled with a trace of amusement, blinking at him guilelessly.

"Inês!" he exclaimed, sounding slightly scandalized.

"I'm pretty sure he'd pass out from sheer emotion during the deed," she went on as if she hadn't heard him.

"Don't go spreading those conspiracy theories of yours; someone might actually take you seriously," Luke protested, furrowing his brows at her. "And please, don't say things like that where the kids can hear."

As if on cue, a young child from the Demeter cabin, her front milk teeth already fallen out, dashed by them, with a few of her friends hot on her heels, probably in the middle of a game of tag.

Casting a disinterested glance at the running kids, Inês waved a hand dismissively. "One day they'll learn."

"And that day isn't today."

She ignored him, sighing heavily as she rested her chin on her hands and tracked Lee's form with her gaze. "Oh, Luke, why not give that hottie a chance? He's so obviously into you."

Following her gaze, he turned to look at Lee as well.

His friend held the ball in his hands, skillfully dribbling past the others as he advanced through the makeshift court with grace—likely because he was so accustomed to Luke's superior agility that the others seemed slow in comparison. Without pausing, Lee jumped as he reached the hoop, scoring for his team and apparently ending the game.

As he watched them celebrate their victory, Luke observed Lee.

He had to admit his friend was handsome, with golden, fluffy hair that gleamed in the sunlight, almost as if he were the star itself descended to earth. He was tall, with broad shoulders and strong arms, the result of countless hours spent practicing archery.

And he was a gentle man.

Yet, the only thing that came to mind was the image of Lee as a child missing a few teeth, biting Luke's arm because he had dared to touch Lee's stuff without asking.

His younger friend had always been weirdly protective of his things.

"I've known him for a decade, back when he was just a little kid trailing after me because we were the only children close in age," Luke finally said. He raised his brows at Inês and added with an exasperated tone, "And he doesn't like me like that."

Inês studied him with a serious expression, then sighed deeply and shook her head, muttering, "Poor Lee."

Before Luke could speak up and voice his *dislike* of her implications, the man in question appeared in front of them.

"Good morning!" Lee greeted them cheerfully, running a hand through his hair.

After returning the greeting, Luke soon found himself squeezed between a nosy girl and a sweat-stinking boy on the bench when Lee decided to join them.

"So, are any of your friends single, Lee?" Inês didn't miss the chance to ask, clearly remembering why they were there—or, more accurately, *her* own reasons for being there.

Rubbing his chin in thought, Lee replied, "There are a few who aren't dating anyone right now"

*There he goes, encouraging her.*

Luke couldn't help rolling his eyes at the topic of conversation, and Inês responded by pinching his arm, making him jump and lean a little into Lee's space.

"What great violence, oh daughter of Love," he commented sarcastically, rubbing his arm as he settled back into his own space.

"Love and War go hand in hand," Inês retorted, though she wasn't looking at him; instead, her gaze was fixed on Lee, her eyes narrowed with intrigue.

Furrowing his brows, Luke followed her gaze, but Lee looked just as he always did—his sunny smile and the familiar curve of his eyes the same as ever.

After giving the younger man a second sidelong glance, Luke turned to face Inês, frowning and huffing as he leaned back in his seat, almost lying down as he asked, "Which victim are you thinking of now?"

"Not a victim," she corrected primly, playfully shaking a finger in his face. "Just another chance at love."

He snorted lightly. "And you've got so much love to give, don't you?"

His friend's face tightened slightly, and her voice took on an odd tone as she replied, "What can I say? I have a tender heart."

Luke shot her a discreet look, thinking that maybe, just maybe, her struggles with upholding her cabin's tradition were weighing on her. As the counselor, she made the rules and could technically do whatever she wanted, but it was easy to talk about change—especially as an outsider. Actually finding the courage to follow through was another matter entirely.

And they were all just children, desperate for their parents' approval, which made breaking tradition even harder.

Sometimes... Luke wondered if the stereotypes were more a product of culture than nature, shaped by demigods trying to mirror their parents. Maybe they thought it would make their parents *look* at them, give them just a scrap of attention.

But what difference did it make? The gods weren't human. They could never love them the way they truly deserved.

*Parents who do not mourn you.*

Kronos' words echoed in his mind, unbidden.

Disturbed, Luke leaned his head back and looked up at the sky.

"Maybe this time it will work out," he finally said, not turning to look at her, though he could feel the weight of her gaze on his profile.

Sighing, Inês replied, "Maybe. We'll see."

"I can introduce you," Lee suggested gently, sensing the mood. "They're good people."

*Oh, Lee, the problem isn't about that,* Luke thought to himself as he closed his eyes and let the wind wash over his face.

After a pause, Inês replied, her voice laced with a smile, "You're a good man, Lee." More mischievous now—clearly recovered from her earlier distress, Luke noted—she added suggestively, "Whoever you end up with will be very happy."

A shocked silence lingered for a few seconds.

Cracking one eye open, Luke discreetly studied Lee's face. His friend looked embarrassed, his cheeks gradually reddening at Inês' words. Lee's eyes flicked toward Luke before quickly averting when he realized he was being watched.

"I—thank you," he finally managed to say after stammering a bit, rubbing the side of his neck sheepishly.

With a giggle, Inês shot a smug look at Luke, who simply rolled his eyes in response.

Turning back to the sky, he ignored the foolishness of the two and let his mind wander. The moment felt peaceful, allowing him to relax a little. Even if he knew things weren't truly calm, it was nice to pretend. As Mr. D had told him, it was important to step away from his brats every now and then.

He cared about them, but he also felt suffocated by them, and he would never get used to the dozens of children clamoring for his attention.

Honestly, it felt good to be around people closer to his own age, even if he was *still* the oldest. Yet, he missed having someone more experienced than himself to offer advice and guidance.

Sure, he could always use Iris Messaging to keep in contact, but… it just wasn't the same.

Absentmindedly, Luke examined the sky, trying to name the shapes the clouds reminded him of, until he noticed the horizon starting to darken. The wind, once pleasant, now felt sharper and colder. Narrowing his eyes, he slowly sat up, watching as the clouds grew denser and thicker, gathering on the horizon and approaching like ominous knights of the apocalypse, their color deepening to a foreboding gray.

Then the sound of rain reached his ears.

*A storm.*

"That's strange," Lee remarked, his voice tinged with worry.

"It will pass us by, it always does," Inês said, attempting to sound confident and a bit dismissive. But she couldn't hide the uncertainty in her tone or the unease in her expression as she glanced at the looming clouds.

The weather inside Camp Half-Blood was always pleasant, untouched by the outside elements unless Mr. D, their resident god and director, willed otherwise. Typically, bad weather would simply circle the Camp, as if there were an invisible obstacle keeping it away.

Personally, Luke believed it was the work of the magical barriers.

It didn't seem far-fetched to think that the same barriers keeping out monsters and uninvited mortals could also ward off rain.

But *this* wasn't a normal storm.

Frowning, Luke's gaze shifted to the campers around him. They continued their activities as if nothing were amiss, trying to project an air of normalcy. But the tension in their shoulders and the way they kept glancing up revealed their unease about the strange weather outside.

Suddenly, he spotted Grover dashing by, a distinct nervous energy emanating from him as he hurried toward Cabin Three.

As if a bucket of cold water had been poured over him, Luke suddenly understood what all these strange occurrences were pointing toward.

The quest had finally arrived. He'd been preparing for this, knowing it was coming with the same inevitability as life and death, but even so, a jolt of shock—and fear—still hit him now that it was actually here.

Warily eyeing the storm, Luke wondered.

Perhaps Zeus was staging this whole spectacle to show his displeasure, or maybe it was a warning to pressure Mr. D into finally doing something about the boy. Or maybe it was simply another disagreement among the gods.

Luke couldn't say for sure, but what he *did* know was that it meant nothing good.

Before long, he spotted Grover again, this time guiding a nervous-looking Percy toward the Big House. Both of them kept glancing at the sky with unease as they chatted about something he couldn't catch from this distance.

"The little Minotaur slayer," Inês remarked when she spotted Percy, her expression twitching slightly. Then she added under her breath, "A son of the Sea—we should have known."

"Yeah," Lee agreed, his voice barely above a whisper. He clenched his hands tightly, looking conflicted even as he spoke.

How ridiculous it was to think this somehow fell on Percy's shoulders.

"Does it even matter if he is or isn't a son of the Flooder?" Luke shot back, his tone sharper than he intended.

He was already tired of this 'forbidden child' nonsense that everyone around him kept going on about. It was bigotry—pure and unadulterated prejudice, plain and simple.

Axel had said it was fear driving them, and Luke could see that—he could even understand some of it. But to behave like this? It reminded him of how some campers had refused to help Thalia that day.

Now, the entire Camp benefited from her sacrifice, which had strengthened the magical barriers, yet they still turned their backs on another innocent child of the Big Three.

Anger simmered beneath his skin, mixed with a deep resentment—so ugly that he often refused to acknowledge it at all.

She pointed to the sky. "*This* is because of him."

"Don't be ridiculous, Inês," he snapped, whipping his head toward her, a frown etched on his face. "Does that scrawny kid look like he can make the sky obey him? He's a child of the Flooder, not the King." His voice grew bitter as he muttered, "That one's already long gone, and maybe you're wishing for this one to follow."

She flinched at his harsh tone, but Luke couldn't bring himself to care, not when it came to this topic.

With a look that suggested his words had struck deeper than he intended—after all these years, and it still only took a harsh tone to make her look like she was about to cry—she responded, her voice hesitant and thick with unshed tears, “I didn’t mean it like that.”

Appearing sympathetic to her distress, Lee spoke up, his tone measured and gentle as he addressed Luke. “I think what she meant is that Percy isn’t at fault. It’s just that his existence alone is enough to make the King... displeased.”

“I know,” Luke replied, his mouth curling in frustration as he turned his gaze to the sky. “I know.”

An awkward silence settled over them, with both of them—one on either side of him—shuffling uncomfortably, casting uncertain glances in his direction.

Luke ignored them, too unsettled by the topic to trust himself not to lash out. They didn’t deserve his anger—maybe his frustration, but not the ugly beast caged beneath his ribs, growing more restless with each tragedy that afflicted him.

This life had changed him.

Clasping his hands, he leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees as he distracted himself by watching the small, innocent children run around. The sight calmed him, even if it was marred by the way they occasionally cast worried glances upward.

Then, the storm invaded Camp Half-Blood.

Beside him, Luke heard both of his friends gasp in shock, while the other campers halted their activities to watch as the clouds—*they shouldn’t be able to cross the barriers*—swept over the meadow, unleashing rain on the ground below.

*A thunder reverberated.*

Soon, he spotted Percy darting out of the Big House, hurrying toward his cabin, with Annabeth trailing behind at a more measured pace before veering off to enter Cabin Six.

Honestly, he wasn’t even surprised by Annabeth’s presence. After Percy’s very public and problematic claiming, she seemed dissatisfied—maybe even disappointed. Still, he knew she firmly believed she had found ‘the one,’ so it was no shock that she’d insist on being part of this quest.

It had been the same in the books, and he didn’t think this particular instance diverged much from that either. After all, Luke knew she had been waiting for this chance for years; she wouldn’t let it slip through her fingers, not even if it meant ambushing Percy with her invisibility cap right after he had visited the Oracle.

Making a decision, he suddenly stood up, intending to go after Percy—he had something that could help the boy, along with some advice.

“Where are you going?” Lee asked, rising to his feet as well. His behavior was still awkward, careful—like he was wary of Luke snapping at him the way he had with Inês.

"After the kid," Luke replied curtly, moving away before either Lee or Inês could say anything else.

Yes, it was bad manners, but this was an urgent situation, and he wasn't in the mood to be around them while they tiptoed around him.

Maybe later he'd be more up for it. Right now, though, there was a kid who needed his help.

He approached Cabin Three and hesitated, a sudden wave of uncertainty washing over him as he took in the building before him.

The cabin was gray, its rough walls adorned with seashells and corals, as if it had been pulled straight from the ocean, complete with a trident above the entrance. It was long and low, not as tall as Zeus's or Hera's, and all its windows were positioned to face the sea.

Steeling himself, he reminded himself that while the gods frowned upon strangers entering their cabins, this was different—he was here to help Percy.

He knocked on the door and waited, listening for the muffled sound of Percy's voice granting permission to enter.

Once inside, Luke noticed six cabin beds—likely from a time when Poseidon had been free to father as many demigods as he pleased. Silk blankets were neatly draped over the beds, and the walls shimmered like abalone, casting an illusion of being underwater, as though Luke had stepped into a world he would never fully experience. Sunlight filtered through the windows beside the bunks, breaking the illusion of the ocean depths and offering a glimpse of the beach outside, reminding him that he was still very much on land.

In the corner, Percy stood by one of the beds, trying to fit his things into a standard backpack from the Cabin Store, Luke noted. Above the bed, the Minotaur horn was mounted like a war trophy. Laid out on the sheets were a few items of clothing, a toothbrush, and not much else.

That wouldn't be nearly enough for this little... *adventure*.

"Percy," Luke greeted, stepping closer. "What are you doing?"

"I'm packing," the kid retorted, the '*can't you see?'* left unsaid but clear in his tone. His hands didn't pause for a second as he grabbed another piece of clothing, shoving it into the backpack without any concern for keeping it neat.

"I can see that," Luke replied blandly, drawing on as much patience as he could muster—he'd had plenty of practice dealing with whiny brats for over five years, and Percy's petulance was nothing compared to Chiara's. "What I meant to ask is, where are you going?"

Percy didn't stop; if anything, his movements grew more frantic as he shoved piece after piece into the bag, his shoulders tight.

"A quest."

“A quest?” Luke echoed lightly, settling onto the bed to face Percy, doing his best to keep his expression neutral and nonjudgmental.

“Yes, a dangerous one,” the boy replied stiffly, refusing to meet Luke’s gaze.

He wasn't saying what his quest was about, Luke noted absently, which wasn't much of a surprise given how important and secret it was.

Nobody was supposed to know about the potential war—not the demigods, or else an actual civil war would erupt in Camp. He knew that much from all the time he’d spent here, from years of watching the campers.

The children would mirror their parents; that much was certain.

"I see. Are you scared?" Luke asked gently.

Breathing deeply, Percy muttered, “No, not scared at all. I’m thrilled to risk my life after just a week here. Totally prepared.”

“Percy,” Luke called, and somehow it cut through the boy's tirade. He turned to look at him, and what a sad sight it was.

Percy looked terrified, his sea-green eyes wide and darting around as if a monster might appear and attack him at any moment, even in this space meant to be safe for him, even under his father’s protection. It wasn’t surprising; most newcomers were skittish until they realized Camp was safe, but Percy didn’t have that luxury. Yet beneath that fear lay a stubbornness, evident in the tightness of his jaw and the determined glint in his eyes with every movement —a clear sense of purpose.

“It’s okay to be scared,” Luke reassured him, his voice soft and gentle. After a brief hesitation, he steeled himself, looking away to focus on a spot in the sea-like walls. “Quests have been banned for a long time; I’m sure you know that by now. The last quest was mine, and it—well, it was terrifying and very dangerous.” With a deep sigh, he turned back to Percy. “Not feeling fear would be the stranger thing here.”

Percy looked curious, likely because, like every newcomer, he’d heard about Luke's achievement—embellished, no doubt.

Luke *hated* it. He hated the glory they showered upon him, the way they overlooked Katherine’s contributions, and how Levi’s sacrifice went unacknowledged.

Still, he couldn’t fault the kids for their curiosity too much.

He never spoke much about it, after all.

Percy's brows knitted together, his lips turning downward in a conflicted expression before he said firmly, “I have to do this.”

Luke studied the boy in silence for a long moment, making Percy shuffle uncomfortably under his gaze. Finally, he sighed heavily and began searching his pockets. His fingers

brushed against something icy, so cold it felt like they might fall off, but he grasped the object firmly. After a brief hesitation, he shook his head and pulled it out.

“This is something my father gave me a few years ago,” he said, smiling humorlessly.

He extended his hand to Percy, opening his fist to reveal a small cylindrical device. It glimmered like polished glass, slightly transparent, with light passing through it, casting a bluish hue. It felt as cold as death itself—as if it had never known the touch of warmth.

“A dog whistle?” Percy asked, his brow furrowing in confusion. “That… that’s nice, I guess.”

Amused, Luke smiled slightly and handed the object to Percy, who flinched at the sudden chill as it touched his skin, surprised by the unnatural cold seeping in.

“And I’m giving it to you for this quest; I have no use for it here in Camp.”

It was something he didn’t quite understand. His father hadn’t shown his face for years after Luke’s visit to his grandmother—not that he was complaining—and then, on his seventeenth birthday, a Hermes Express package appeared at the foot of his bed. The accompanying letter simply stated that Pipo was now big enough to warrant such gifts.

How Hermes knew, especially when he hadn’t been coming to Camp—at least, not that Luke was aware of—was something he chose not to ponder. With the memory of that stalker lurking around his mother’s house, he figured it was best to remain ignorant.

It was definitely better for his mental health.

Now, Luke was the proud owner of a Stygian Ice Whistle, though he had never used it—never really needed to.

It made him wonder why his father had felt the need to give it to him in the first place.

Was it a whim? A duty as Luke’s patron? Or some convoluted plan his father had concocted? Perhaps it was concern—or even a form of paternal affection, however limited Hermes might be in that regard.

*Mercury?*

Luke wouldn't know; his father's mind, as always, remained a mystery, and he didn't want to waste time—or his sanity—trying to understand it.

Percy made a sound in the back of his throat, his expression betraying the thought that the gift was useless, yet he didn’t want to offend. He finally managed to say, “Thank… you?”

Chuckling softly, Luke explained, “It’s a whistle for my hellhound. If you blow it, he’ll hear it no matter where he is and come to you.” He clasped his hands, his expression turning serious. “But you can only use it once. Once it’s blown, it melts and shatters into pieces. So make sure you only use it when you really need to.”

Glancing down at the device in his hand, Percy's expression shifted to one of newfound appreciation, though he stiffened at the mention of 'hellhound.'

It was an understandable reaction, really, but Pipo was nothing like that wild invader.

"Thank you," he said, his tone more sincere this time.

"Think nothing of it, kid," Luke replied, standing up and ruffling Percy's hair. He laid his hands on the boy's shoulders and added, "Just remember to be careful. The outside world is dangerous, especially now that you're known as a child of the Flooder…"

"I'll try," the boy promised, carefully stowing the whistle in his pocket.

Luke noted that the kid hadn't really made any concrete promises.

"I'm serious. If you encounter something you can't handle, just run. Better yet, don't go chasing danger unless you have to. There's no need—no reason—to risk your life more than necessary."

Percy shot him a look that Luke couldn't quite decipher, but it was gone in an instant.

"Don't worry," he replied, "I'll *only* do what's *strictly* necessary."

Another lack of promise, underscored by a petulant tone.

"Kid," he began, frowning down at Percy, "your life isn't something to gamble with."

Percy furrowed his brows in anger, pressing his lips together. He stayed silent, glaring at Luke with his hands clenched tightly at his sides.

But his eyes shimmered with unshed tears.

*Sally Jackson,* Luke suddenly realized.

Breathing deeply, he sighed and leaned down to meet the kid's gaze, softening his voice. "Look, I know it's hard to lose someone. I understand that personally."

The boy's eyes widened slightly, a flicker of panic crossing his face before he averted his gaze, trying to hide it.

"I… I just miss my mom," he admitted.

"I understand," Luke whispered. "But would she want you being reckless?"

Shifting slightly, Percy shook his head to indicate no.

Straightening up, Luke studied the boy in silence, considering what kind of support he could offer.

He had tried to prepare the boy as much as he could, making sure he was safe without going along himself. But there was nothing more he could do—he wouldn't be the one

accompanying Percy on this quest.

All he could offer was comfort and advice while he still had the chance, before the trio set off.

He knew the boy would head to the realm of the Unseen regardless—there was a suspicion that Hades had stolen the bolt, and to retrieve it, Percy would need to venture into the Underworld.

However, Luke was aware that Percy's real motivation came from the Minotaur incident with his mom. Everyone at Camp was aware of it, but it rarely came up; the immature children were more interested in the tale of his victory over the monster than by offering any sympathy for his loss—especially now that he was being avoided.

Making a decision, Luke spoke up, his tone light, as if he were discussing the weather rather than encouraging this kid—he couldn't believe he was doing this—to do something utterly stupid. "Well, recklessness can be a foolish choice. But if it's tempered by caution, maybe it can be called… daring." He smiled, adding, "And isn't daring the bread and butter of being a hero?"

Percy snapped his head toward him, looking incredulous, though an underlying unease lingered in his expression.

It was likely because he was scared of Luke knowing about his plan to rescue his mom from the Underworld.

Not that Luke would ever confirm or deny his knowledge; if Percy questioned him, he'd simply smile and play dumb—he was very good at that.

Besides, the kid's surprise was quite naïve.

Percy had practically announced his intentions to the heavens with how often he pestered him about the realm of Hades. So, even if Luke hadn't known beforehand, he would have figured it out eventually.

"Ah…" the kid stammered, finally managing to say, "Yes, daring."

"Now, let's get you some more supplies," Luke said, clapping his hands and smiling innocently as the boy studied his face. He gestured toward the clothes and toothbrush. "This won't be nearly enough."

Before long, he led Percy to the Camp Store, where they—or more accurately, Luke—browsed for more useful items after the store had lent Percy a bit of money—both regular cash and golden drachmas used by the gods. All the while, the employee shot Luke distrustful glances.

Rude, but not entirely unwarranted.

After all, they were well acquainted with the shenanigans of his cabin by this point.

In any case, Percy trailed behind Luke, more focused on the Greek coins he was fiddling with than on gathering supplies for his quest—his bag now in Luke's possession as he took care of getting what he needed.

Internally, Luke felt like one of those moms dragging their kid along on a shopping trip, but he brushed the thought aside and focused on the task at hand.

He browsed through the money pouches and wallets—if he remembered correctly, in the book, the kids had lost money on this quest, and he wanted to prevent that this time. Money was too important, and neither of the trio had the thieving skills or inclination that he had at their age.

After spending some time browsing the options, all while keeping an eye on the employee who was watching him just as closely, Luke snatched a wallet. One of those magical ones that could hold more than it seemed, which meant it was pricey—and Luke, ever stingy, would never spend his hard-won money on something he could steal, especially not on something like this.

Throwing a glance over his shoulder to check on the boy—who stood a few steps away, staring at the items with a bored expression—Luke turned his attention to the other essentials for a quest.

A map, among other things, would be especially useful for a cross-country journey like this one.

Absentmindedly, he heard the sound of someone entering the store, but he was too focused on discreetly taking the items under the hawk-eyed gaze of the employee to pay it much attention.

Once he had gathered everything he needed, Luke turned back to see Percy frowning at the door. But as soon as the boy caught sight of Luke, his expression returned to normal.

Not paying much mind to the strange reaction, Luke gestured for them to leave and whispered, "I got you everything." Once outside, he raised his voice slightly and added, "Well, almost everything. The medical supplies like ambrosia and nectar will be handed out by Chiron."

Percy nodded, casting him a wary glance before eyeing the bag suspiciously. Luke chose to ignore the unappreciative reaction to his help.

He had never stolen from a poor individual, only from stores, wealthy men and his mortal cousins—he had *morals*.

Somewhat.

Guiding the kid to the borders, Luke spotted Chiron, Argus—their resident thousand-eyed giant chauffeur—Annabeth, and Grover already gathered there. The centaur was handing something to the girl—a canteen and a sack, the nectar and ambrosia he had mentioned to Percy: the food of the gods and the demigod's magical healing supplies.

Soon, they reached the others, and he tossed Percy his backpack before turning to Annabeth with a worried frown.

“You be careful out there, Annie. Do you have everything? I know I taught you what to take, but let’s check. Knife—you know where to stab, don’t you? I can show you again—”

“I have everything,” she interrupted, her face gradually flushing as her eyes darted to the others around them.

“But we can still check. I helped Percy with his things, but I didn’t see yours,” Luke retorted, already reaching for her bag before she danced out of his grasp.

“I have everything,” she repeated, her tone exasperated.

He studied her for a moment, then sighed and rubbed his temple with one hand. “I suppose you do. I’m just worried.”

“It’ll be fine, Luke,” Chiron said warmly, his horse form hidden in his wheelchair. However, the tightening at the corners of his eyes revealed his true mood.

Luke sighed once again and nodded.

He moved to ruffle Grover’s hair, then hugged Annabeth—one she returned just as fiercely, despite her desire to be seen as strong. He finished by giving Percy a few light taps on the back.

“I wish you all the best on your quest,” he had said before leaving, stopping at a distance just far enough to watch Chiron hand Percy the sword he would never part with—Anaklusmos, as it was called, though he knew it better as Riptide.

Then the kids were herded into the Camp truck, venturing out into the world beyond, with all its dangers waiting for them.

As he watched them leave, his heart heavy with worry and unease bubbling beneath his skin, Luke wondered how things would unfold now that certain things had changed.

He was not the thief, but someone else *was*.

*Well, I didn’t give them those cursed flying shoes; hell, I don’t even have flying shoes,* he thought to himself, a hint of relief washing over him, *and I didn’t see anyone handing anything strange to the kid, either, so that’s a small victory.*

Nodding to himself, Luke turned around and headed toward the Arts & Crafts Center.

He had a shroud to make.

Chapter End Notes

1 - eu vou sentar - I’m gonna sit

Inês, as a child of Aphrodite, can sense emotions—different types of love and anything related to it, which basically covers a lot. Besides interpreting facial expressions and all that, she’s experienced in these sorts of things. So, she knows things. And poor Lee—Luke only sees him as a kid. Which is understandable when you’ve known the boy since he was 8, was a weird mix of child and adult trying to survive, which essentially meant no thoughts of romance with the brats around. And people, kiddie Lee liked Luke, but not like this. This kind of feeling was a result of puberty and the timeskip.

Luke is getting angry—after all the tragedies and now with even heavier stuff starting. A Titan is invading his dreams, not letting him sleep, trying to manipulate his mind. Then there’s the whole ‘forbidden child’ thing and his concern for his charges.

Luke and Percy bond a little. Percy is terrified (the boy’s only 12, sent to retrieve a bolt people think he stole, in the realm of the dead, and the god who wants him pulverized owns that bolt). But there’s determination beneath all that fear to save his mom, and Luke recognizes it. He knows it’s inevitable, so he tries to encourage caution. And yeah, there’s a dog whistle for Pipo the Dangerous, a gift from Hermes—I thought it made sense. After all, Hermes hangs out in the Underworld too. And stingy Luke makes yet another appearance, lol.

And then the mothering. Annabeth is embarrassed by her big brother in everything but blood fussing over her in front of everyone else. She’s too old for that—she’s a capable demigod, Luke!

Anyway, thanks for reading! Comments are always appreciated! And don’t worry if you’re late to the party!

So, do you guys think Luke really had a small victory?

# Chapter 34: TLT - Nightmares

Chapter Summary

Axel is in the middle of teaching Luke his tricks when Kronos invades and ruins the lesson. As Luke finally wakes up, he wonders who the thief is and holds Clarisse back from beating up the other campers.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The world around Luke was shifting, as if it was not real, and, well, it wasn't. They were in a dreamscape, a shared one between him and Axel.

According to the older man, it would make it easier for Luke to shape the world, since it was also part of his own mind as well.

For some reason, Axel had chosen this night to teach Luke his tricks—or at least to try.

Honestly, Luke was skeptical about the possibility of learning anything even remotely related to dreams—hell, he hardly ever dreamed at all.

How could Axel think he had any talent for this?

Shaking his head, he focused on the landscape around him for what felt like the umpteenth time, trying to make sense of it and ward off the growing mental crisis he felt at the sight.

It was an empty space, yet everything at once—like unshaped clay, limited only by the sculptor's imagination, an object of infinite possibilities. Still, it was hard to describe, especially since his mind could barely comprehend what his eyes were seeing.

The space around them stretched infinitely, as if there were no end. The ground didn't feel solid—actually, it wasn't even ground in the true sense, more like a sketch or suggestion of one, with smoke rising from it like vapor from geysers. The sky was a swirling mass of colors, shifting and clashing like a kaleidoscope. Sometimes the colors became blinding, other times they dulled, and at moments, one color would dominate, as if the sky couldn't decide what it wanted to be.

To be more accurate, the entire world seemed uncertain of how it wanted to appear.

A short distance away, Axel moved through the smoke with practiced ease, his gaze uncharacteristically focused. Under his careful attention, the smoke began to recede. Strangely, the ground appeared more solid after that, and as Luke stared, wide-eyed, a path began to form.

His mind protested, insisting the path had always been there—he just hadn't noticed it before.

Gesturing for Luke to come closer, the older man explained, "I'm shaping the world now. Normally, I would arrive with it already formed, but this is to teach you."

"I don't see how I can do this," Luke countered, furrowing his brows as he gazed at the shifting landscape around them. It felt unbelievable, and he could barely wrap his mind around it.

"Just try," Axel replied blandly. "Ultimatums come later."

"Oh, fine." Luke huffed through his nose. Pressing his lips together, he glanced around the confusing space—*and Axel wanted him to mold it somehow*—and asked, "How do I do it?"

"Imagination and will."

And *that* explained absolutely nothing.

What did he mean by imagination and will? If it worked like that, Luke would have willed plenty of things into existence already—like making Axel a lot less cryptic.

The concept felt too… *abstract* for him. He needed to understand—understand how it worked in a concrete way. Was it magic? If it was, how did it operate?

He had no answers, and Axel seemed content to let him stumble in his own ignorance.

*Stupid man.*

Snorting slightly, Luke muttered sarcastically under his breath, "What great instructions. I understand perfectly now."

Axel simply blinked, showing no sign of being affected by Luke's displeasure—*rude*—and stood there, watching him with a patient gaze, waiting for him to take action.

Taking a deep breath, he shot one last annoyed glance at Axel before focusing on the space around them, feeling a bit lost on how to proceed.

*Imagination and will,* he repeated to himself, placing his hands on his hips as he narrowed his eyes at the shifting landscape, *first, I need to think about what I want to magically bring into existence.*

It had to be something simple. Maybe a flower? That had to work since it was the only thing that came to mind that felt manageable for a first try.

Feeling rather foolish, Luke furrowed his brows and fixed his gaze on a spot on the ground. He concentrated on the image of a flower—a simple, common daisy, with a slender green stem, a bright yellow center, and white, oval-shaped petals surrounding it.

Time passed as he exerted all his willpower to make it appear, envisioning the daisy sprouting from the cracks in the stone path Axel had created, despite all his doubts about

what he was doing.

But nothing happened, not even after what felt like hours. No plants sprouted in the cracks of the stone, no white flowers appeared—nothing, not even a tiny stem.

*Nothing.*

With a disappointed huff—though not surprised by the outcome—Luke relaxed his shoulders and turned back to Axel, raising his eyebrows at the man. “Well, I couldn’t do it.”

The words ‘*just like I told you’* went unsaid but were heard all the same.

Rubbing his chin, Axel wore a thoughtful expression as he studied the spot where Luke had tried to manifest his little daisy. He hummed, narrowed his eyes, and then declared, “No talent, I see.”

Luke blinked, incredulity evident in his movements as he tilted his head to stare at his friend.

But before he could voice his thoughts—*of course he wasn’t good at it; he had told the older man already*—Axel continued, “Negation is different.” He extended his hand and materialized a bottle of water, staring at it for a moment before it puffed out of existence, as if it had never been there in the first place. “No need for imagination, only will and desire.”

That… seemed *somewhat* easier to do.

Still too abstract for his liking—how could he make something disappear just by wishing it away? Yet, that idea felt more acceptable than believing that will alone could bring something into existence without explanation.

Maybe it was that destruction felt easier than creation; it required less of oneself to kill and destroy than to bring something to life. Or perhaps creation was simply more complex, leading his mind to dwell on the hows and whys.

To create, something already had to exist—*a baby is born from the union of their parents, a sculpture emerges from molded marble, and a painting comes to life with a splash of colors*.

But to destroy, all one needed was the desire to do it.

Nothing more.

“You try now,” Axel declared, conjuring another bottle of water and handing it to him.

Sighing in exasperation, Luke complied, taking the bottle in his hands. He studied it for a moment, then focused all his desire and will on making it disappear, refusing to let it remain near him as he willed it to vanish from sight.

He felt as if he were actually achieving something—an internal sensation growing, inching closer to the surface—before the world around them shook violently.

Alarmed, Luke struggled to maintain his balance as the ground beneath his feet wavered, resembling liquid rather than the solid stone it had been moments before. Beside him, Axel frowned, looking genuinely concerned—a troubling sight, given the older man's usual stoicism.

But what he said next made Luke even more anxious.

"The shield broke."

"Didn't you say it was supposed to hold the entity back?" Luke exclaimed, struggling to step off the street as the ground beneath him suddenly decided it wanted to act like quicksand.

"Not forever," the older man retorted, glancing up at the kaleidoscopic sky with furrowed brows.

Following his gaze, Luke saw something he struggled to comprehend even as he witnessed it.

It looked like a cut through the sky, as if someone had sliced through paper with a knife instead of piercing the heavens. It appeared disturbingly like a wound, a brilliant gold gradually darkening until it resembled rust at the center of the injury.

Surrounding it were fragments of something he couldn't identify—transparent shards that shimmered eerily, reminiscent of glass.

"We have to do something," Luke declared, though his tone wavered with uncertainty.

What could he possibly do? He couldn't even manifest a single flower, so creating a shield to block a Titan felt practically impossible.

"I can try to fix the shield," Axel replied, his expression grim as he added, "But I've never tried it while under active invasion."

By Axel's tone, he wasn't sure if he could stand against the invader and Luke agreed. There was no way his friend could actually confront a Titan, even if that being lacked a physical body at the moment—especially not alone.

"What can I do?"

His friend stared at him for a moment, his expression unreadable, before looking away to the sky and saying, "Try to wake up."

"Will you try too?"

Axel nodded slightly. "When the opportunity arises."

Unable to argue, since Luke felt pretty useless in this situation, he tried to focus on waking. Axel had mentioned that one could force themselves out of the dreamscape, but that was easy for him to say—being a son of Hypnos, anything related to sleep came naturally to the older man.

Yet, even as he tried to focus, his attention was drawn to how the world around him seemed to collapse in on itself even as it was being constructed—like it was being forcibly reformed.

Anxious, Luke risked a glance at the sky.

There, the rift widened, and the glass-like shards multiplied, attempting to gather into a twisted parody of a mirror. Yet, as more formed, others shattered without any clear reason, breaking apart as quickly as they appeared.

Suddenly, a voice—familiar, ancient, and powerful, as sharp as a knife—sliced through the chaos. It was soft, almost persuasive, but laced with an amused edge that made the hairs on the back of Luke's neck rise.

*Why fight? Let me in, little demigods. Can't you see? I can help you.*

Kronos had manage to enter the dreamscape.

But it seemed the Titan hadn't taken full control yet, Luke noted under the haze of his anxiety, watching how certain parts of the landscape resisted, stubbornly holding their shape even as they shimmered and twisted under the pressure of the invasion.

Panic gripped his limbs, and Luke desperately tried to wake up.

The urge to escape, to flee from that voice, was overwhelming. But he couldn't focus—everything was shaking, the voice kept speaking, and his fear made it impossible to clear his mind.

It was as if his limbs were made of stone—clumsy and heavy. Yet, somehow, Luke managed to turn and look at Axel.

The older man was struggling, his already pale skin now ghostly white, eyes sunken with dark purple shadows beneath them. The effort to create a shield, especially against the power of a Titan, was draining him rapidly, taking far too much out of him.

Luke knew this was a losing battle.

Helplessness washed over him.

Was his desire to protect his mind from invaders really such an impossible thing that he was being punished for daring to try? Guilt nagged at him: was their shared mindscape the reason the shield felt so weak, so easy to break?

He wondered what would happen once the Titan fully entered—what terrible things he would be made to see, especially with Axel forced to watch them alongside him.

*He couldn't let it happen.*

Then, anger surged within him, overwhelming the helplessness and igniting his veins with a fiery intensity.

*This creature was not welcome here.*

Under Luke's skin, that same sensation he'd felt when trying to make the bottle of water vanish surged back, expanding rapidly and violently. It was as if he were bloated, filled to the brink and ready to burst, but he didn't care.

He only cared about forcing Kronos out.

Suddenly, something inside him burst, releasing a torrent of energy like water gushing from a broken dam. It left him feeling weak and disoriented, as if he'd just run a marathon on an empty stomach.

For a moment, nothing changed. Then, Kronos' voice cut off mid-sentence, as if the call had been abruptly disconnected. The world stilled, halting its chaotic dance of destruction and creation.

Slowly, Luke looked up.

In disbelief, he watched as the wound in the sky began to stitch itself closed, a horrific injury mending before his eyes. Gradually, the vibrant hues of the dreamscape reemerged in its place, revealing a shimmering layer he barely noticed—only visible in the way it reflected the surrounding colors—though some areas still seemed to be missing.

*The shield.*

Luke was seeing the shield, even as broken as it was.

"Strange," Axel remarked, his tone steady, though the effort to maintain that composure was evident.

Turning to face his friend, Luke studied Axel's pale, weary features before asking, "What do you mean?"

"Different," the older man replied, swaying slightly as he struggled to maintain his balance—something Luke could empathize with, feeling just as unsteady himself.

"Let's sit down first."

Clumsily, both of them nearly collapsed to the ground, and Luke was surprised to find it felt soft, almost like a mattress. He shot a glance at Axel and rolled his eyes. "You're in this state, and you still managed to make the ground feel like a bed?"

His friend didn't respond to the question; instead, he continued his earlier observation as if he hadn't heard Luke at all. "Strange power. Not dreams."

"Not dreams?" Luke echoed, frowning. "Are you sure? I did what you said—negate or whatever."

"Very sure," Axel replied, his gaze intense as he studied Luke, as if he could extract the answer from him by sheer will. Maybe he was trying, considering they were still in the

dreamscape. “Not negation—something *different*.”

“How?”

“I don’t know, but it is very different from what I can do,” Axel replied, turning to the sky and letting out a weary sigh.

Luke decided to trust his friend's expertise on the matter, feeling more relief than anything else in that moment. Even so, he had to admit it was curious.

However, what really mattered was that it had done what he wanted: given him some respite in his sleep. So, whether it was sleep-related or not didn’t matter much—he would gladly take it.

“Well, at least it did its job,” Luke said, feeling his energy slowly trickle back as he rested.

Did this power drain so much from him, or was it just the strain of facing something like Kronos?

Axel nodded, though a hint of confusion still lingered on his face. With a deep sigh, he simply said, “Wake.”

“Yeah, it’s time to head back,” he replied, his voice weary. “Will I feel this tired in the real world?”

“No,” Axel replied, sitting up. “Physical body is rested. Will counter some effects. I made sure of it.”

“That’s good.”

Axel gestured for Luke to sit up. “We will share dreamscape again, sometime.”

Then, he placed a hand on Luke's forehead, and everything faded to black for a moment.

The next thing he knew, Luke jolted awake, sitting up with his blankets tangled around him.

Settling down once he recognized where he was, he let himself fall back onto the bed, running a hand over the soft, familiar mattress. As Luke glanced around his cabin, he took in the sight of his little charges and younger siblings, all either asleep or trying to get back to sleep—it was early, the sun barely up, casting a soft light through the windows.

Luke took a deep breath, then winced, rubbing his chest as Mercury’s aura pulsed erratically for a moment. It seemed... agitated, for lack of a better word, which confused him for a split second—the god’s energy hadn’t reacted much in the last few ominous dreams he had.

Then it clicked: he was agitated too, and the aura was likely just mirroring his own emotions.

Trying to calm down, he pressed a hand over his eyes and focused on his breathing. But each time he felt himself settle, the pulsing of the aura pulled his attention back, making him tense up all over again.

It was a vicious cycle—the agitation of the aura feeding off his own, and his own restlessness stoking the aura's reaction.

With a frustrated huff, he realized he had to do something *personally*—otherwise, the aura would keep pulsing like this for hours, and he definitely wasn't in the mood to deal with that all day.

He rubbed his face with one hand before resting it over his chest, right above his heart, focusing—though it wasn't difficult with the constant pulsing already demanding his attention. Slowly, the world around him blurred, fading into the background, until all that remained was the aura, glowing like a bright light in the middle of the darkness.

With some caution—though less than when he was younger, having tested many… things over the years—Luke focused on the foreign energy.

It was always wise to be careful; after all, this was a piece of a *god*.

Thanks to his Grandma's lessons and constant exposure to it, Luke had reached a point where he could almost say he could *see* the aura, not just feel it. But that sensation remained elusive, always fleeting and vague.

The aura was a shifting thing, fluid and slippery, made of pure silver from what little he could tell.

With practiced ease, Luke did that poking thing—he still wasn't sure exactly how, but he was pretty certain it was his own energy at work. The aura instantly latched onto him, as it always did.

It didn't scare him much anymore; after all, it had never actually harmed him.

The sensation was still as strange as ever, however, making him shift slightly in place, but he brushed it off and concentrated on the foreign energy. It seemed to waver a bit whenever he did this, as if it found a strange thrill in his attention.

More importantly, it always calmed down when Luke focused on it.

Soon, the uncomfortable pulsing receded, the energy settling as it continued to cling to him. Knowing that trying to force it away was pointless, Luke seized the chance to study it, especially now that he knew it as Mercury's.

He could say with absolute certainty that this aura was different from his father's.

It had a more structured feel to it, an order in its shifting and changing, less… whimsical and more disciplined, definitely more serious. Denser than his father's aura, it felt more intense, more calculating—as if it were always measuring something, weighing whether it was worth acquiring or not. And that was the only thing keeping the hunger at bay, the insatiable urge lurking just beneath the surface. Yet, despite all that, it remained charming, brimming with a deep, simple curiosity that felt almost playful and kind of friendly.

To say his father's aura and this one were the same would be like claiming ravens and crows were the same thing. Simply incorrect.

Mercury's energy appeared satisfied as it gradually released its grip on him, retreating to its usual spot and leaving Luke alone.

*Finally.*

Once the aura had fully retreated, Luke opened his eyes and let out a relieved sigh through his nose. He sat up, realizing that rest was no longer an option. Scanning the room again, he noticed the light filtering through the window—it was getting brighter, indicating that breakfast time was approaching.

Stretching a bit—Axel had been right: he wasn't tired at all; in fact, he felt quite invigorated —Luke shuffled to the edge of his bed and carefully stepped onto the small patch of floor not occupied by sleeping little ones.

As soon as he did, though, Chris, his brother who slept nearby, jolted awake with a gasp, his face pale and sweat dripping from his brow.

It seemed like a nightmare. Yet, a suspicion still lingered in Luke's chest, causing the aura inside him to waver slightly, as if it were echoing his unease.

Brushing off the thought quickly—guilt gnawed at him for even considering it, but hadn't his brother sided with Kronos in the books? *He came back, though,* he reminded himself hastily —Luke smiled at Chris and said playfully, ignoring the situation, "Well, looks like you woke up before I could shake you awake for once, Chris."

His brother chuckled awkwardly, and while it could easily be seen as sheepishness, Luke noticed the panic in Chris's widened eyes and the agitation radiating from him.

The boy's gaze darted to the other side of the room, landing on another figure—Ethan, *Levi's* brother, he noted with a numbness in his chest—who had also woken up with a gasp, mirroring Chris's reaction.

"Yeah, I did," the boy finally replied, nervously tugging at his ears—a nervous tick, Luke noted. "Sometimes I can exceed expectations."

Luke snorted, tousling his brother's hair before rising to his feet. "Well, you're just a box of surprises, and that's a good thing."

Chris's smile was tinged with pain at the corners, but he managed to answer with just enough cheer before turning to rummage through his things to get ready for the day.

Luke stole a quick glance at the boy, analyzing his strange behavior with a heavy heart before turning back to his tasks.

He set about waking the others, herding his little hellions into starting the day.

It was a daily battle to get the kids to stick to the schedule; he often had to drag Connor and Travis out of bed or argue with Chiara on her moody days, insisting that she didn't have even five minutes to spare.

In the end, Luke managed to wrestle them all into a semblance of order and lead them to breakfast.

The meal turned into another struggle; some were still half-asleep, nearly dozing off on their plates, while others were wide awake and eager to make his life difficult. Travis, in particular, had developed a knack for inciting food fights, with Connor gleefully encouraging him—the little demon thought it was funny.

Once he had restored order, Luke clapped his hands, lining up his cabin like a little parade of ducklings. He led them to their first activity of the day—and to his job, too.

Luke was now the official swordsmanship instructor. He had reluctantly taken on the role after it became clear he wasn't going anywhere following his father's tantrum.

So here he was, teaching the little brats how to swing their pointy sticks without accidentally killing themselves or their friends in the process.

Once in the arena, he instructed his brats to get ready while he went to fetch his own equipment.

Thankfully, Clarisse and her siblings hadn't arrived yet—a rare occurrence, considering those brutes were always eager to take the first chance they got to beat each other up.

This time, Cabin Eleven was sharing lessons with Cabin Five, and he was already dreading it. The combined might of his little troublemakers and those bloodthirsty children was sure to create chaos, with fights breaking out for certain.

Soon, Cabin Five arrived, with Clarisse at the helm.

She had grown significantly over the past few years, her muscles more defined from her serious training, and she had shot up in height. Overall, she was becoming an impressive—and intimidating—young woman; maybe she would grow to resemble her sisters from her father's side, the Amazons. Not that Luke knew exactly what they looked like, but he assumed they were fearsome, given the myths. However, the look in her red-brown eyes betrayed her simmering anger, darkening them to the color of rusted blood.

It was a gaze that promised violence for anyone who dared to stand in her way.

Behind her, her siblings fed off her fury, their agitation obvious. However, their excitement was tempered by a palpable wariness of Clarisse, evident in the way they all kept their distance; the gap between her and the first camper in line was considerable.

*Today's lesson is going to be a nightmare,* he thought as he watched the pack of brutes shove his cabin out of the way and hastily arm themselves.

Their barely repressed violence was obvious in every movement, and, as he watched, he felt a sense of resignation wash over him.

More stress. *Wonderful*.

Once all the brats were ready, Luke stepped into the center of the space, prompting them to gather around him like a swarm of curious bees.

“Good morning,” he greeted, waiting for their response, even if it came out a bit cranky. He nodded and continued, “We’re starting with a warm-up by repeating the basics. Remember, the basics are the foundation upon which everything else is built. If your foundation is weak and poorly constructed, the whole building will collapse. So, get on with it.”

They followed his instructions, some dragging their feet, but his unblinking stare made them a bit more enthusiastic.

Occasionally, he corrected the campers' posture, especially the younger ones or the newcomers—those who hadn’t trained as long as the rest.

Even so, the unease hung in the air, and the kids frequently stole glances at the sky, worried frowns creasing their faces when they thought he wasn’t looking.

It was just a day after Percy had been sent away and a day after a storm had swept through Camp Half-Blood for the first time in their lives, leaving their nerves frayed and on high alert.

An understandable feeling.

Luke couldn’t deny his own discomfort at the situation, made worse by the fresh memory of Kronos attempting to invade his dreamscape, the Titan’s voice whispering in his ear. He was all too aware of what was at play, and the uncertainty of who had taken his place only increased his unease.

The kids might not have the knowledge of what was at stake—not like he did—but they could feel the shift in the air, a promise that something was coming.

*Well, not all of them are completely clueless,* he amended, glancing at the campers around him.

Some were likely being courted by Kronos to join his side; Luke wasn’t arrogant enough to think he was the only demigod experiencing invasions in his sleep.

Axel was proof enough of the contrary, and it worried him.

If Kronos was targeting demigods outside of Camp Half-Blood, it made Luke wonder whether his friends were also being tempted—or even the demigods who hadn’t been brought to Camp yet.

Could it mean that the thief was located in the outside world?

Not knowing for sure made him uneasy.

Luke couldn't shake his vigilance, scrutinizing the kids under his care as if they were under a magnifying glass. He noted every reaction and action, guilt battling against paranoia within him. He wondered which of them might be contemplating desertion, which one might raise a sword against family or friends, and… which one could possibly be the thief.

Shaking his head to dispel the gloomy thoughts, Luke redirected his focus to the lesson and shot one last glance at the training demigods before deciding it was time for the next step.

He clapped his hands and announced, "That's enough. Pair up; you have five minutes to find a partner. And remember," he narrowed his eyes at them, especially the Ares kids, "no maiming. This is training, not a duel to the death."

He watched as they rushed to find their friends—or to someone they were annoyed with, eager to use the excuse to beat each other up—chatting as they paired off. The Stoll brothers teamed up, which was no surprise, while Ethan approached Chiara. That made sense given their similar powers, but it still stirred an uncomfortable feeling in Luke.

He was never fully at ease around Levi's brother.

Each time he got close, Levi's dying voice echoed in his mind, haunting him. So, he tended to avoid the boy, a choice that filled him with guilt. It didn't help that he knew the kid had joined Kronos in the books, making him a suspicious figure by default—even if he was only twelve.

He wasn't proud of feeling this way; shame gnawed at him for not trying harder to connect with the boy, to maybe change his fate.

Luke was an anomaly; he was unhindered by the Fates. But even so…

His spiraling thoughts were interrupted by the sound of screams and fighting, prompting a curse that would've earned him a slipper to the head from his grandmother if she'd heard it.

He quickly turned his head toward the source of the noise and saw Clarisse wielding her sword—though it wasn't her primary weapon, she handled it well enough—as she hurled insults at her opponent. The poor kid was barely managing to keep up with her onslaught, struggling just to avoid being shredded, let alone fight back.

What had Luke just said about this not being a duel to the death?

His expression hardened as he marched toward the chaos, the other kids parting like the sea, their eyes wide as they watched the brutal beatdown.

"Clarisse," Luke said, his voice sharp with warning. "Enough."

She glanced at him, then shot a quick look at her opponent, and for a moment, Luke feared she wouldn't listen. But then she huffed, her expression settling into a stubborn scowl as she backed off.

He gestured silently for someone to escort the beaten-up kid to the infirmary, then shot a *look* at the other campers watching the scene unfold.

“Get back to your training,” he ordered, and they scrambled to comply, pretending as if they hadn’t been watching just moments ago.

Still, it was clear they were paying attention. Nosy little brats.

Turning back to Clarisse, he studied her for a moment.

Her shoulders were tense, and she seemed defensive—frustrated, maybe. From all the years he’d known her, he recognized that she was the type to mask her true feelings behind a facade of anger.

It was her shield.

Even if he understood that, she was too agitated to be allowed to pair with the others. She was too strong and too angry to care about the potential harm her lashing out could cause.

"I'll be your opponent, Clarisse," he declared, slowly unsheathing his sword.

She smiled, a vicious, feral thing.

Then she lunged at him.

Luke evaded her blows with ease, holding off on counterattacking for now. He was aiming to tire her out, knowing that taking her down too quickly wouldn’t get him anywhere.

For a while, they danced around each other, Clarisse cursing and trying to bait him with insults. Ironically, her name-calling only seemed to make her angrier, especially since he responded with nothing but a teasing smirk.

Only when she was breathing heavily, her face flushed and sweat dripping from her brow, did he decide to strike.

Using his speed to his advantage, Luke pressed forward, easily overwhelming her in her fatigued state. With a flick of his wrist, he disarmed her, and before she could even blink, he had his sword poised over her heart.

“Do you yield?”

With a tired glare, she huffed and nodded, her voice dripping with exasperation despite the weary drawl. “I never get why you do this little dance of avoidance when you could take me down in under a minute.”

Luke answered with a guileless smile, neither confirming nor denying her statement, which made her roll her eyes at him.

With a soft chuckle, he led her to a corner of the arena, handed her a bottle of water, and stood beside her with his arms crossed, both of them watching the other campers train in

silence.

Giving Clarisse a sidelong glance to gauge her mood, Luke noted that she seemed calmer now, her aggression simmered down after the fight.

Turning his attention back ahead, he remarked in a neutral tone, “You almost ripped that kid’s arm off.”

“If you’re going to admonish me, get it over with,” she retorted dryly, taking a long gulp of water.

“You know it was wrong,” he replied calmly, refusing to take the bait. “I just want to know why you did it.”

Clarisse snorted and tossed the empty bottle to the ground. “Years went by with no quests, ever since I was a kid. Then this new guy shows up—a nobody—and just because he’s the Flooder’s kid, suddenly he gets a quest the moment he’s claimed? Like he’s some kind of exception.” She muttered under her breath, “It’s unfair.”

These little child soldiers and their obsession with proving themselves to their godly parents was something he could never quite understand. Still, he knew he couldn’t shield them forever, no matter how much he wished he could.

*War was coming.*

Luke sighed, the sound heavy with weariness. “A lot is changing, Clarisse. Your time will come.”

“Like Annabeth’s did?” she shot back, her voice thick with frustration.

*Ah. Now it makes sense.*

“You know she didn’t have a choice in who to bring on the quest,” he replied gently. “She’s not the one leading it.”

“Who said anything about me wanting to go with her?” Clarisse immediately protested, snapping her head away from him. Still denying her friendship after all these years. How silly. “I just can’t believe she got a quest before me. I’m older and stronger than she is.”

Luke nodded, trying to hide his smile. “Well, you’ll get your chance soon enough. I think the quest ban’s going to be lifted soon, and then you can prove you’re better than Annie. Who knows? Maybe you’ll even get the chance to show her up on the same quest.”

She shot him a look, eyebrows raised, clearly not fooled by his sneaky attempt to imply she was friends with Annabeth. But she couldn’t hide the small smile that tugged at her lips.

Shaking her head, more relaxed now, she changed topics. "And what about my brother? When's he going to come visit?"

"He'll be around in a few days," Luke replied, letting out a heavy sigh as he braced himself for the upcoming visit.

Whenever Peter showed up, Luke found himself battling him multiple times a day—something about making up for the lack of duels throughout the rest of the year, or so Peter claimed.

Sometimes, he would sneak off into the forest just to catch a break from it all.

Still, he had to admit that Cabin Five became more disciplined when Peter was around, which was a silver lining.

“Great!” Clarisse exclaimed, her eyes sparkling with excitement. She had always admired her older brother, even now as a grumpy teenager. “I’ll show him just how much I’ve improved.”

Before Luke could say anything, she dove back into training, her eagerness obvious and, *thankfully,* she was more at ease now.

Meanwhile, the other campers skirted around her like she was a dangerous beast, casting wary glances at the back of her head.

Shaking his head at the sight, he found himself reflecting on his own upcoming visit to his grandmother.

Maybe she would have some information about what he had managed to do in those dreams. Axel had said it wasn’t sleep-related, but it wouldn’t hurt to gather intel on it, especially with the Kronos situation looming.

*I’ll ask things discreetly during my next visit*, he decided, rising to his feet to break up another fight.

Chapter End Notes

Luke is trying to learn new things and failing quite admirably. Well, Axel knows his stuff—specifically, the aspects related to his father’s domains, which primarily encompass sleep-related matters, including dreams. However, he’s no expert on everything, and that will make sense in the future. Regarding Kronos, he attempted to invade, brute-forcing his way in, but that was just a small piece of his conscience, I feel; he was busy trying to change other demigods’ minds in their dreams all at the same time. Basically, he was distracted. But he’s a Titan, so going head-to-head wouldn’t work; only a surprise would.

This brings us to the next point: the new mystery power. I can only say it’s interesting, lol. As for Mercury’s aura, I tried to highlight his primary identity as a god of commerce, as well as the Roman aspects (discipline, hierarchy, pragmatism, and such), though it has common aspects with Hermes’, one being that both gods are considered

friendly to humans. Regarding its agitation, was it because of Luke's agitation or because of the new power he had used? Who knows? And yeah, Luke is slowly getting annoyed by it, like the annoyance is slowly taking the place of his wariness.

Now, about the swordsmanship lessons: everyone is uncomfortable; they know something is happening, but they just don't know exactly what. Fear and wariness are rampant, and it will cause problems. Luke is suspicious of everyone, which is sad and something he feels guilty about. Concerning Ethan, Luke carries a lot of guilt over how Levi died. He knows he should try to help, but then his own trauma rears its head, and Luke kind of freezes, leaving him in limbo. So, he just avoids the kid—his way of ignoring his problems, like he does with everything.

Clarisse is mad that a nobody got a quest before her, lol. She's mad at Annabeth too (I like to think they made a promise to go on quests once they were older when they were just tiny brats, before they remembered that *no, they're not friends*). So, Peter is the only person who can actually tell Clarisse what to do and get away with it. He'll appear at some point to control his cabin of boars.

In any case, thanks for reading! Comments are always appreciated, and it doesn't matter if you're late to the party!

What do you all think of Luke's new ability?

# Chapter 35: TLT - Visit to Grandma

Chapter Summary

A visit to Grandma, where Luke tries to extract information about his dreams, ends with him learning more about his family lore. She then takes him for a walk around the neighborhood to train his sight (she said he's useless at it), which goes… okay.

Chapter Notes

Chapter released early!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Luke sat on the sofa in his grandma's house, flicking through the TV channels while listening to her chatter on about the mundane details of their day.

They had both gone to church early in the morning, and it was always an experience to pass through those doors. That temple held so many blessings that Luke was sure any monster that followed him would be incinerated just by standing in the vicinity. And if they somehow survived, it wouldn't be for long; the church staff was thorough with their… *cleaning*.

After the mass ended, they returned to Grandma's house for lunch, followed by their usual ritual of lying on the floor to rest. Eventually, Luke grew tired of it and moved to the sofa—Grandma, however, chose to lay in her hammock, one foot on the ground, using it to gently swing back and forth.

And there Luke sat, perfectly at ease, his mind drifting as he watched the TV with only half an eye. He felt a rare sense of contentment, the usual nervous energy that buzzed beneath his skin finally absent.

The scent of their lunch still lingered in the air—Brazilian food that always made him think of home.

His sense of peace was amplified by his surroundings. The living room was cozy, with the worn, blue sofa he was sitting on, old but well-loved, practically pulling him into its comfort. Corny pillows with mismatched floral patterns were tossed haphazardly across it, but that only gave the space more character. The television sat on a wooden stand, flanked by his grandma's collection of ceramic chickens and a few of her fake plants, completing the homely feeling.

All in all, it was a peaceful day—relaxing, just what he sorely needed.

Even yesterday, when he had arrived to spend the weekend with her, Luke didn't exactly have what he could call a peaceful day.

His grandma had ran a boot camp, pushing him to improve his lacking ability to see through the Mist—though she preferred to call it a veil, insisting it was a more accurate term. They walked the entire neighborhood all day, encountering a few aggressive monsters along the way.

Thankfully, those encounters didn't last long under the combined force of his bronze sword's attacks and Grandma's trusty holy water sprays.

"I wish they'd put novelas[1] on the schedule here," she complained, still swinging in her hammock without missing a beat.

"You could subscribe to one of those services that offer international channels, Grandma. I'm sure there are plenty out there," he suggested, pausing to watch a documentary about animals he had never seen before.

She clicked her tongue and retorted, "Then I'd have to pay more. No. I'll wait until your aunt brings me the recordings when she visits again or look around the community for them."

"If you're sure…"

"I am," she declared firmly, as if she had a judge's gavel to slam down, making it clear the matter was over. "Your aunt always brings me a stack of recordings."

His aunt was his mother's older sister, and he had met her only once.

It had been at a family reunion his grandma organized—a small one, as she called it—just his aunt, uncle, and their respective families. Coordinating the gathering had already been a challenge, given that one lived in Brazil and the other was on the other side of America.

As it turned out, he had a bunch of cousins, which made Grandma's claim of a small gathering feel rather misleading.

In any case, Aunt Isabela was a kind woman—warm and somewhat eccentric. He didn't find that all that strange, especially with his own father being a Greek god; in truth, he didn't feel he had any grounds to call anyone odd.

"How's Auntie, anyway?" Luke asked distractedly, flicking through the channels once again.

"She's fine. She seemed to get a little sick after incorporating a… spirit guide, I think she called it, recently, but she's better now."

*What.*

"What do you mean, Grandma?" Luke asked, bewilderment evident in his voice as he turned to face her.

“Your aunt is a medium, didn’t you know that?” she said casually, as if discussing what to make for lunch, treating it like perfectly ordinary knowledge that her daughter was a conduit for spirits.

No, of course Luke didn’t know that. Nobody had told him; how was he supposed to know?

His grandmother continued as if she didn’t even notice his shocked expression. “It gave me quite a scare when that girl was younger, it did. She had strange dreams and told me things about family members who had passed long ago and whom she’d never met, all with such detail. She even heard voices…” Grandma grimaced. “She could *see* too, which was fine and expected, but those other things made me worry she was being possessed.”

Luke made a sound in the back of his throat, hoping it was an appropriate response.

However, his mind was fixated on one thing his grandma had said: the mention of his aunt’s dreams. He hadn’t forgotten his objective of trying to discover something about dreams by sneakily questioning his grandmother.

Until now, though, he hadn’t found an opportunity to approach the subject in a way that felt natural. But this was his chance.

“Dreams?” he prompted, keeping his voice as casual as possible, as if he were only mildly curious about the topic—though in reality, he was quite keen to learn more.

“Yes, dreams about deceased relatives. She knew everything about them—their names, what they did for a living, and sometimes even when and how they died.” Grandma furrowed her brows, then added, “She told me at the time that an angel would sometimes come and speak with her, but she couldn’t see its face.”

It sounded very much like his own current dreams, but benevolent rather than malicious. Honestly, he would have much preferred an angel visiting his dreams instead of Kronos.

“And what about bad dreams? Didn’t she have those?”

Grandma gave him a long look, analyzing him for a moment before she hummed and decided to answer. “She did, and she still does. I think she calls them obsessing or negative spirits. I just call them demons. She says they cause nightmares or disturbing dreams that involve the demon in some way.”

“I see…”

That sounded more like what Kronos was doing to him, but Luke wasn’t sure the two situations were truly comparable, especially since the invading entity in his case was a Titan. Still, since Kronos was bodiless, could he be considered a spirit?

Well, he didn’t know, and it didn’t really matter.

What really mattered now was figuring out how to stop it and perhaps learning more about his strange new power—though he had no idea where to begin—rather than worrying about what other label Kronos fit.

“Is Auntie some kind of exorcist?” Luke asked, nonchalantly redirecting his attention to the remote as he flipped through the channels until he settled on the news.

Nothing else seemed to catch his interest, and it was nice to get a glimpse of what was happening outside Camp Half-Blood’s borders every once in a while. Though, truthfully, his focus was more on distracting his grandma, pretending his curiosity was casual rather than connected to his own problem.

She was already suspicious of his questions, and she *always* had an uncanny knack for figuring out whatever he was trying to hide.

Grandma snorted. “No, she doesn’t banish any entities. She just sees and hears things, has strange dreams, and might incorporate a spirit or two from time to time. The truth is, Isabela is simply more… open to it than most.” She glanced at Luke, adopting an educational tone. “Her abilities are different from ours, and even from your mother’s. The scales have fallen from our eyes,” she paused, then corrected herself, “well, yours are still in the process of falling. In any case, we can see beyond the veil and even interact with it, but she lives within it.”

Then what did that make Luke? As a demigod, he also resided beyond what his grandma called ‘the veil.’

Perhaps ‘in between’ was a more precise term—straddling the line between mortal and divine. By that logic, maybe his aunt was caught between the real and the spiritual, or something like that.

It felt oddly right to him, and the aura within him pulsed slightly in response.

“Then how does she deal with those nightmares if she can’t get rid of the demons or whatever they are?” he asked, tilting his head with genuine puzzlement.

It was strange.

Luke could *somehow* banish invaders, and Axel had his own way of dealing with them. They were demigods, after all, with abilities beyond those of ordinary mortals—Axel even had the advantage of being the son of the god of sleep.

But regular people had to have some way to defend themselves, especially those as vulnerable as his aunt. And if they did have those techniques, he could incorporate some of them into his own situation, though he had no idea how much help it would be.

Still, trying wouldn’t hurt, and maybe he’d end up surprised.

“There are cleansing and protective rituals, prayers, and even sacred objects she can use to help stop those dreams,” Grandma answered, pausing her swinging to sit up. “Some demons, though, can be annoyingly persistent. It would be different if she were an exorcist, but alas, she isn’t, so she has to rely on those methods instead.”

“Cleansing rituals?” Luke echoed, shooting his grandma an amused glance. “Let me guess, holy water?”

“Do not underestimate the power of the Lord,” she stated solemnly, though an amused glint danced in her eyes.

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” he retorted, his tone playful.

Given how well-protected the church was, its blessings lending it a fortress-like barrier—and being Catholic himself—Luke really wouldn’t dare to doubt the Lord’s power.

She chuckled a little, shaking her head in amusement.

“And how is exorcism different, Grandma?” Luke asked, glancing at the news as it transitioned to highlight the previous days’ events.

His tone was casual, but Grandma narrowed her eyes, furrowing her brows as if she were suspicious of something.

Finally, she answered, “Mediumship is about interacting with the spiritual realm. Some mediums can become exorcists, but exorcism is simply the act of forcibly ejecting an entity from a body, object, location, or whatever it may be.”

“Connected but not the same,” he mused, stroking his chin in thought.

It felt closer to his powers than his aunt's situation, though he sensed it wasn’t quite the same—he couldn’t pinpoint why, but it was an instinctual feeling deep within him. It was strange, really, since he’d never felt so intensely, and without any clear reason, about anything before.

Yet after managing the impossible and kicking Kronos out of his dreamscape, this sensation clung to him.

It wasn’t entirely unfamiliar, he could admit, but it now occupied a more prominent place in his mind—like a buried feeling that had been excavated, bringing it closer to the surface and making it easier to sense and perceive.

“Are you having—”

Whatever his grandma was saying faded from his senses as he caught sight of a familiar figure on the television.

*It was Percy Jackson.*

Widening his eyes, Luke leaned forward in disbelief as the reporter highlighted a familiar face on the screen.

It *was* Percy. That messy black hair and those intense sea-green eyes could belong to no one else.

The report began by reiterating that the boy's mother was missing and labeled him a prime suspect in her disappearance. It mentioned that he had confronted some elderly passengers a few days earlier and highlighted his involvement in a bus explosion, stating that Percy had fled the crime scene with two teenage accomplices. The report then moved on to the latest incident: the explosion of the Gateway Arch, where Percy was now considered one of the suspects.

Finally, the segment concluded with the reporter discussing Percy's stepfather, Gabe Ugliano —*what a fitting name,* Luke thought with disdain as the repugnant man appeared on screen, feigning tears—who was offering a cash reward for any information leading to Percy's capture.

It was bad—really bad—that Percy was being seen as some sort of criminal, but the relief he felt knowing that the little brat was still alive overshadowed it.

He even felt his chest lighten a little at the sight, as a weight he hadn't realized had been so oppressive eased from his shoulders. He comforted himself with the knowledge that his brats were alive, that he hadn't altered anything so irreplaceable that it could lead to their horrible deaths, and that the absence of flying shoes hadn't made their survival impossible.

The relief was so overwhelming that he unconsciously leaned back, sinking into the sofa.

"A little terrorist," his grandmother declared with a scowl, shattering the moment. Her eyes radiated disapproval as she glared at Percy's picture. "Just look at him—he's got that little delinquent look. To make his own mother disappear—"

"Grandma," Luke interjected calmly, cutting her off before she could go further with her unfounded accusations. "That kid is a demigod under my care, and he's not some little terrorist in the making. He's actually a good kid."

"Maybe to you, but it seems like he's showing his true colors now. How do you explain this if it isn't true?" she argued, gesturing toward the television with a tone of disbelief.

"Grandma," he said again, exasperation creeping into his voice. "The television loves to exaggerate things, so let's take it with a grain of salt. We shouldn't jump to hasty conclusions before an actual investigation is done. I know the kid, and you know how the Mist—the veil —can distort people's senses. It's probably hiding the truth; monsters might have gone after him and caused these incidents. They tend to target demigods at the first chance they get, and he's younger than I am."

She harrumphed but eventually settled down, crossing her arms and furrowing her brows stubbornly. Her silence was enough of a sign that she was taking him at his word, which was the best he could hope for, really.

After all, his grandmother was a fiercely opinionated woman, and getting any sort of agreement from her felt oddly like herding cats.

Suddenly standing, Grandma Aparecida shot one last glance at the television before snatching the remote from his hands and turning it off. She then looked down at him—only

because he was sitting, and even then, just barely—and declared after giving him an appraising once-over, "This reminds me that you, young man, need to squeeze in some more training before heading back to that little supernatural playground of yours."

"It's called Camp Half-Blood, vó[2]," he mumbled, correcting her as he rose to his feet with a heavy sigh of resignation.

"Whatever, it doesn't change the fact that you need to learn how to *see*. You're useless at it, and we really should put on some work on controlling that sensitivity of yours better too. The only thing we've found that helps is exposure. So until we think of something better—if there even is a better option—we'll keep doing this," she retorted, frowning as she moved with surprising agility for someone her age to grab her slippers and head toward the door.

Following her at a leisurely pace—definitely not dragging his feet out of frustration—Luke slipped on his flip-flops and grabbed his backpack, hiding his bronze sword inside. He muttered under his breath, "I'm not *useless*, just not particularly skilled at it."

"If you have time to grumble, you have time to train. Come on," she called, an impatient look in her eye as she glanced at him, already standing by the open door.

With another heavy sigh, Luke followed her out of the house and into the neighborhood outside.

This had been their routine since he was fourteen, ever since his grandmother decided he needed to be taught: a long, very long, walk to make him try and *see* what Grandma could *see*, along with the occasional monster that dared to test their luck.

Thankfully, as he grew older, the number of monsters willing to target him had started to dwindle.

Walking through the familiar streets—so familiar he could probably navigate them with his eyes closed; well, he had his internal navigation sense to make it easy, but that was beside the point—Luke squinted as the sunlight hit his face, momentarily blinding him.

It was summer, and the heat was a bit bothersome, but not unbearable. In fact, it reminded him of his old home from *the before*, stirring some fuzzy feelings inside his chest.

Luke figured his Grandma must feel the same, given that she'd chosen this place to settle. The climate was familiar enough to be comforting, yet the place was still distinct enough to remind them both they were far from their homeland.

It was clear from the way everything was laid out—the streets lined with neat, evenly spaced houses, each without walls or gated fronts to mark their boundaries. He still found that odd, something that bothered him even at his mother's place. What about security? Privacy? The architecture stood out too: all wooden, each house strangely uniform. No verandas, no balconies, nowhere private to sit outside—just open yards where anyone could see you. And those yards were big, but empty, with nothing but grass, no gardens, nothing.

Despite its openness, the space felt oddly isolating.

It was too still, too quiet. The silence was occasionally interrupted by the distant hum of cars, but there was no chatter or laughter to fill the air. The streets were deserted—no people wandering, no kids playing or running about. The scene he was so accustomed to was absent; there were no elderly residents, especially the old matriarchs, sitting outside their homes in chairs, gathering with friends to watch the world go by, exchanging gossip, or engaging in conversation with random passersby.

Perhaps his grandmother felt this feeling of strangeness more strongly, or maybe she had simply grown accustomed to it after a lifetime spent in this place.

His thoughts abruptly shifted when he caught sight of that strange neighbor of his grandma's—the man who always, without fail, seemed to be sitting on his porch with a plate of food beside him. He wore an expression of profound sadness, tinged with a fragile glimmer of hope, as if he still expected someone to magically appear.

But nobody did, and each day, the man remained there, waiting.

He was thin, as if he had been wasting away under the weight of his sorrow. His skin, which should have had a warm fawn hue, appeared pale, taking on a sickly bluish tone. Deep, dark purple shadows hung beneath his eyes, and his hair—a wavy, dark-brown mane that could have graced the pages of a magazine—was chopped unevenly and looked oily, suggesting he hadn't taken care of himself in a long time.

"Poor man," his grandmother's voice interrupted his observations.

Turning to her, he noticed the sympathetic expression in his grandmother's eyes as she paused beside him to gaze at the miserable sight before them.

"Why does he keep doing this?" Luke asked, furrowing his brows at the man, a trickle of pity causing his heart to clench slightly.

"His daughter is missing," Grandma explained, her voice trembling slightly as an old pain flickered in her eyes. With a heavy sigh, she whispered, "It's been five years now."

Silently, Luke squeezed his grandmother's shoulder, attempting to offer some comfort. Yet, deep down, he understood that despite her love for him and her happiness at having him back in her life, he could never fill the void left by his mother's absence in her heart.

His father's refusal to let his mother leave and stay with Grandma, especially when she needed someone to care for her, had struck her deeply—Luke knew that much. For weeks after, she had been angry, her moods shifting like the weather whenever he visited. He noticed how she sometimes retreated to her room, and the muffled sounds of sniffing he heard through the door when he brought her food spoke volumes about her sorrow.

At least Grandma had the option to visit his mother, something his father hadn't protested against, as Mr. D had informed him.

So, she found solace in those visits whenever she could, though it was a sorry sight to behold. The first time she went, his grandmother had been deeply shaken, but she never shared the

details of what she had witnessed. Instead, she reassured him that she was doing her best to take care of both the house and his mother.

Luke wanted to visit his mom too, but his grandma, along with Hermes—from what his uncle had told him—and Mr. D himself, insisted he shouldn't. So, he was barred from those visits, stuck at Camp while Grandma spent a few days with her daughter. It made his chest tighten, that ugly feeling stirring within him, but there was nothing he could do.

His mother was fragile, and Luke's presence had the potential to set her off.

Shaking his head to dispel those thoughts, he licked his lips and hesitated for a moment, trying to compose himself. Then he asked, "Does he really do this every day?"

Grandma nodded, placing her hand over his for a brief moment. "I try to help him, encourage him to take care of himself. I even share any food I make and have lunch with him sometimes, just to make sure he doesn't waste away. But even so…" She sighed heavily, adding, "Mr. Asher is simply too deep in his sorrow to be left alone."

"It's hard not to drown in sorrow under those circumstances," Luke commented, his lips turning down.

Not knowing where your daughter had been for five years, wondering if something had happened to her, or if she was even alive… it was distressing. Luke could sympathize, though not as deeply as his grandmother could.

"Yes, it's very difficult," his grandma agreed, her sad eyes lingering on the man—Asher, that was his name—for a moment before she forced herself to look away. With a rough gesture for him to follow, she added, "Let's go. You still need to train, and time doesn't wait for anyone."

Taking one last glance at the man, Luke turned to follow his grandmother, unsure of where she was leading him or if there was even a destination at all.

Sometimes, it felt like she was taking him on random paths, only to surprise him by arriving at some place she wanted to go—be it a small market for groceries, a clothing store, or just a park. Other times, it remained a leisurely trip around the neighborhood.

*Grandma really loved to bater perna*[3]*,* he mused with an internal sigh as he followed her around.

Suddenly, she stopped and pointed to something perched on a nearby roof. Squinting against the sunlight, Luke shielded his eyes with a hand and spotted a small brownish-red bird, fluffing itself up and meticulously preening its feathers.

"What do you see?" Grandma asked, crossing her arms and looking up at the bird with raised brows, a quiet reverence in her expression that Luke didn't fully understand.

Since she seemed relaxed, Luke figured it wasn't one of those monsters that wanted to kill him and eat his flesh. The bird, too, seemed indifferent to their presence, casting them a brief,

imperious glance before fluffing itself up even more, as if to show off.

“Well, a bird.”

“Yes, it’s a bird. A magnificent one beyond the veil. Now describe it to me—what does it really look like?” she insisted.

With a sigh, he narrowed his eyes, trying to see what she was talking about.

Honestly, the bird didn’t look very impressive. It was small, its color dull and unremarkable, and it seemed to flaunt itself as if it were some grand spectacle worth gazing at. Taking a deep breath, Luke reminded himself that this wasn’t its true form—that the Mist was playing tricks on his senses, making him see something far less amazing than what truly existed.

Sharpening his focus, Luke clung to the knowledge he knew to be true, etching it deep in his mind: this was a trick, an illusion crafted to hide what lay beneath.

Suddenly, he became hyperaware of the Mist—it surrounded him like dust in the air, so subtle that even his unusual sensitivity barely registered its presence. He could feel that if he let his attention waver for even a second, he could lose his grasp on it completely.

Once he recognized its presence, struggling to maintain his grip on it, he felt as if he could finally *see*.

Soon after, he glimpsed the bird's true form: a brilliant red, as vivid as furnace flames, glowing in the sunlight and creating the illusion of radiating waves of heat. It was larger too, resembling a bird of prey, regal in its stature, with a long neck and a crown of orange, red, and white feathers atop its head.

“A phoenix,” Luke whispered to himself, his eyes widening in shock despite himself.

But then he blinked, and in that split second, the magnificent creature was gone, replaced once more by a small, unimpressive bird.

Unable to hold back, Luke scowled, a frustrated sound escaping his throat.

“Yes, a phoenix,” his grandma remarked, unfazed by his reaction, her eyes bright as she continued to gaze at the creature. “A good sign. Very good.”

He nodded in full agreement, a quiet reverence stirring within him as he strained to see the bird's true form again, eager to witness that impressive sight once more. But before he could catch another glimpse, the disguised phoenix stretched its wings and launched itself into the air, soaring toward the sun.

Instinctively, Luke shut his eyes, the bright light searing against them as he turned away.

When he glanced back, the bird was long gone.

He barely had time to feel a hint of disappointment before his grandmother's voice cut through it, demanding his attention.

“An improvement,” Grandma remarked, continuing her walk without a backward glance, prompting Luke to hurriedly catch up to her. “You took less time to achieve true sight this time.”

“Still couldn’t hold it for long,” Luke muttered, letting out a frustrated huff through his nose.

Grandma stared at him for a moment, then declared, “It’s your lack of belief.”

Snorting, he countered, “How can it be a lack of belief when my dad is a pagan god and monsters are always coming after me?”

“You don’t want to *believe*, Lucas. You have this image of how the world should be, and it influences how the veil interacts with you, making you see only what you wish to see, even when you know better.” With a sigh, she added solemnly, “It’s as if you choose to be blind, and that’s dangerous—especially for you.”

Pressing his lips together, Luke turned away, his brows furrowing in frustration.

He wasn’t like that—*he wasn’t.*

“Belief shapes our reality, Luquinha,” his grandma continued. “It’s the foundation of our minds, influencing every thought, every perception, and how we come to understand the world.”

Even with his skepticism—he wasn’t some deluded escapist trying to shut his eyes and pretend; *he wasn’t*—Luke nodded, not wanting to waste time or breath arguing with her.

After all, he knew his grandmother *very* well.

Grandma held his gaze for a moment, but thankfully, she didn’t say anything more. Instead, she gestured for him to continue following her as she led him somewhere else.

Soon, Luke found himself in front of a small grocery store—a Brazilian one, obvious from the chatter in Portuguese and the big green-and-yellow flag proudly displayed nearby.

“Grandma…”

"Since we're already out, might as well make good use of the time," she explained, reaching for a hand basket. "And you can help carry the groceries back."

So, he was the pack donkey. *Great*.

Before long, Luke trailed behind his grandma as she flitted through the fruit section, inspecting each piece carefully like it held the secrets of the universe. Then came the meat, and other essentials, as she methodically filled her basket. Eventually, it was overflowing, and, with a sigh, she started passing items over to him to carry.

At first, he managed to hold everything just fine, but as she kept piling on more and more items, it quickly became a struggle to keep it all balanced in his arms.

Humming to herself, Grandma shot a glance at him and offhandedly commented, "You know, this scene reminds me of something."

"Of what, Grandma?" Luke asked, exasperation creeping into his tone as he struggled to juggle everything in his arms. He could feel the eyes of the other customers on him, their amused smiles softened by a hint of sympathy.

Grandma was well known in the community, after all.

“There’s a nice man who helps me sometimes with the groceries,” she answered casually. “He carries them for me when I walk back home.”

“That’s nice of him,” Luke replied distractedly, twisting his body to keep a package of cookies from tumbling to the ground.

“Very,” she agreed, then added casually, “Especially for an entity—or god, or whatever he is.”

*What.*

“Grandma!” he exclaimed, the shock causing him to lose his grip and let the package slip to the ground.

Clicking her tongue in displeasure, Grandma Aparecida bent down to pick up the package of cookies, straightening up with a wince and placing a hand on her lower back.

“Don’t go around making a scene,” she chided, shooting him a disapproving look. “And don’t let things fall, either. My back isn’t what it used to be.”

“Grandma!” he protested, stumbling over his words. What the hell? Why was she so calm about this? Finally, he managed to blurt out, “How can you keep coming here after that? Think of your safety!”

“Bah,” she huffed, her tone dismissive. “I’m not some coward who can be chased off my own lawn. I built my life here—blood, sweat, and tears—and this is where my community is, where my people are. No entity is going to scare me away.”

Luke could only send her a wide-eyed look before unconsciously glancing around the grocery store.

Everything appeared normal, and he didn’t sense anything out of the ordinary, which allowed him to relax a bit. Unlike the Mist, gods were easy for him to notice, especially since they rarely bothered to hide themselves. Besides, to him, their auras felt distinctly different from the Mist—more pronounced, almost loud in their presence.

“Stop acting like a fool, Lucas,” his grandma sighed, exasperated, as if he were the unreasonable one here. “That man was very keen on interacting with me. It was deliberate—every time I came here, he somehow appeared with a friendly smile to help me with my groceries.” She shot him a pointed look. “Let’s think this through for a second. If I decided to change where I shop—which isn’t happening—he’d just follow me to the new place.”

“But—”

“And he was nice enough, so it’s fine,” she cut him off, not allowing him to respond as she marched over to the cashier.

Curling his lips in displeasure, Luke followed her to the counter and dumped the groceries there, crossing his arms and making a face while his grandma paid.

His mind raced as he mentally went through a list of gods who could possibly be bothering his grandmother, trying to think of a motive for it. But just as he was getting somewhere, she called for him to help her and head back home, pulling him out of his thoughts.

“Don’t make that face,” she admonished him, her tone full of mirth.

“I’m just worried about you,” he replied, his voice slightly sullen—he *wasn’t* pouting; he didn’t do such things.

“Don’t worry about me; I’ll be fine. He was nice enough—the most he did was ask a few probing, if somewhat strange, questions.”

“What kind of questions?”

She paused, reflecting for a moment, then answered, “He asked how we—humans, I guess—spend our time, something about gifts too, and if I ever feel lonely being at home alone; questions like that.”

Wait a minute.

No, it couldn’t be.

*What the hell is Mercury doing sniffing around my grandma?* Luke wondered, a wave of apprehension washing over him as he stepped back into Grandma’s house to help her unpack the groceries before he had to return to Camp.

Chapter End Notes

1 - novelas - soap operas
2 - vó - grandma
3 - bater perna - the literal translation is ‘to beat one’s leg,’ but it’s an expression that means ‘to walk around.’

So, here she is again—Grandma Aparecida, as calm as ever, like a hurricane, lol.

Auntie Isabela’s situation parallels Luke’s in some ways, but ultimately, they’re two different things. Luke is trying to gather some intel and ends up discovering a few

things, but whether they're actually useful to him, especially with his new powers, remains to be seen.

Then, surprise—Percy appears on TV! Yes, our trio is alive, which gives Luke a huge sense of relief. And of course, Grandma immediately starts judging Percy, lol. Luckily, Luke steps in to do his job as a Big Three kid defender.

As for the mystery middle-aged man, we've got more clues now, and I'm excited to see what theories you all come up with! And yeah, Hermes didn't let May leave the house, which wasn't exactly unexpected. At least Grandma can visit, but the bad news is Luke can't. May isn't doing well—she's actually gotten worse over the years. Her visions (remember the Fates thing with Luke) have her… confused, and Luke tends to set her off. The phoenix is symbolic (it is a symbol of a bunch of things, not just the obvious) and it's also important in Christianity. Then there's Luke's difficulty seeing through the Mist, which brings us to this: Grandma really is spitting facts right into Luke's face—we all know how much he avoids things until he can't.

And now we've got the revelation that Mercury has been sniffing around Grandma, lol. For what possible reasons? We'll see… Just a gentle reminder that things are different in this universe; hints have been thrown around, and we'll see…

And here's a little drawing of Luke for those interested (a shout out to kolyiinc, whose art inspired me to pick up a pen after a long time) : https://ibb.co/zJmzVCP

Thanks for reading! Your comments are always appreciated, and it doesn't matter if you're late to the party!

So, have you figured out who the middle-aged man is with these new hints?

# Chapter 36: TLT - Civil War

Chapter Summary

The standoff between Poseidon and Zeus is leaked, sparking division among the cabins. Luke tries to maintain the peace but ultimately fails.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Camp Half-Blood was in chaos.

Luke had just returned from visiting his grandma when he found Camp completely upside down. Sure, tensions had been running high for a while—ever since Percy was claimed, and even before that, since the winter solstice. Things hadn't been normal for months. But now, it felt like the bubble had burst, and one wrong move could spark an all-out war between the cabins.

As he stood in the common area, listening to the campers argue, only one thought raced through Luke's mind: someone had leaked the situation between Poseidon and Zeus. Someone from the inside. Which meant there really were infiltrators in Camp, and he needed to find out who—*fast*.

"The King has been stolen from!" Malcolm exclaimed, representing Cabin Six in Annabeth's absence, his face contorted with indignation.

Personally, Luke couldn't help but find it ridiculous that a twelve-year-old was the head counselor. Sure, Annabeth was experienced, which was why she held the position, but still, it felt strange.

Even so, he had to admit he preferred Annabeth over this boy, even if Malcolm was older and her chosen second in command.

"But nobody knows who the thief is," Luke interjected, stepping in before Clarisse, her eyes blazing with fury, could say anything that might spark a fight.

Internal conflict was the last thing they needed at this moment.

The boy snorted, throwing his hands up in exasperation. "Who else could it be? The Lord of the Sea has acted against the King before. It's not too far-fetched to think he'd do it again—especially now that he has a claimed son! It's a clear violation of the Pact!"

*And Zeus hasn't violated the Pact before, kid?* Luke thought to himself.

Voices murmured in the background—some agreeing it was suspicious, others arguing it was too convenient a scapegoat, while some pointed to other suspects, with the hellhound incident clearly on their minds.

Thankfully, some of his little hellions were defending Percy, which Luke noted with relief—even the Stoll brothers, surprisingly enough, though they were doing it in a very backhanded way.

“Ridiculous,” Luke countered, raising his voice above the uproar of the arguing demigods. With the entire Camp present, it would be a recipe for disaster if things took a turn for the worse. “What proof do we have beyond these accusations? Our parents are silent; they haven’t shared anything with us.” With a tone that brooked no argument, he added firmly, locking eyes with every camper he could, “I say we don’t act until we have more information. This isn’t a matter for demigods.”

“Very typical of a son of the Thief to wiggle out of any conflict,” Malcolm shot back, his gray eyes flashing like swords. The kid was angry, but he wasn’t even close to being as annoying or insane as Ryan.

Luke could deal with petulant brats like this with ease.

“And how typical of a son of the Owl-Eyed,” Clarisse cut in, her voice dripping with disdain as she glared at the boy, “to make ultimatums without knowing the full truth.”

Malcolm's face turned red as he stepped forward, prompting a mean, victorious smirk to spread across Clarisse’s face as she straightened up, ready to strike. But before a fight could erupt or Luke could step in, one of Malcolm’s siblings grabbed his shoulder and whispered something, shooting unfriendly looks in Cabin Five's direction all the while.

“Luke is right; the gods haven’t said a word to us about this situation,” Inês interjected, placing a hand on Clarisse’s shoulder to calm her down.

Clarisse complied, though grudgingly, still keeping her gaze fixed on Malcolm.

“Which means we weren’t meant to worry about this,” Luke concluded, sending his friend a silent thank you, to which she subtly inclined her head in acknowledgment.

He didn’t think they, as demigods, were meant to know about the potential war—at least not yet.

Luke wasn’t sure what the situation would be if war *actually* broke out, but he doubted the gods wanted a conflict between Poseidon and Zeus. They were likely dragging their feet to avoid taking sides for now, which probably explained why the campers were being kept in the dark.

As Luke scanned the crowd, he felt a flicker of relief. His words seemed to finally make the campers think for once, calming them down a little. They were likely hoping their parents would resolve the issue before war actually broke out.

It made Luke wonder what his own father might be up to. Not that he particularly wanted to know the details of Hermes' life—if he wasn't bothering Luke, that was good enough for him—but he had to know something, especially since Hermes was the Herald of the gods and could navigate the other gods' domains with little issue.

Besides, his father was his patron.

And Luke was the type of guy who knew how to take advantage of situations when it suited him, even if he disliked certain… aspects. Even the things that frustrated him had their uses, and since they were already there, he might as well make the most of them.

"Does it matter if we were supposed to know or not?" Clarisse's voice sliced through the quiet murmurs like a declaration of war. Locking her gaze on Malcolm, she raised an eyebrow mockingly and said, "Now that this information has reached us, it's already leading *some people* to make hasty decisions."

*Oh no, Clarisse, please don't antagonize Malcolm in the name of rivalry—not now,* Luke silently pleaded, widening his eyes as he glanced at Inês, hoping she'd intervene.

But she wasn't looking at him; instead, she stared at Clarisse as if she had grown a second head.

*Goddamnit.* This was bad.

Twisting his lips in disdain, Malcolm shot back, "I wasn't aware that Cabin Five had taken to sympathizing with the son of the Sea, especially after your… own particular *disagreements* with the new guy."

A tense silence settled over the gathered demigods, each of them waiting with bated breath, already sensing that things were about to spiral out of control.

Straightening up, Clarisse's hands twitched as if she wanted to grab her spear—the one Percy had broken, a gift from her father, Luke recalled with resignation. Ah, *damnit*, Malcolm's comment had clearly struck a nerve. She retorted darkly, "And what do you actually know, you insufferable smartass? You don't even know if the Flooder is the real culprit, yet you're out here making claims and trying to get us all to side with you."

"It's the logical scenario," Malcolm countered primly, his entire cabin crowding around him. "I'm not surprised the daughter of the Brutish doesn't seem to understand the higher aspects of war—or that she can't seem to use her brain at all."

*Fuck.*

Flaring her nostrils, Clarisse scowled and lifted her chin with defiance. "If that's how it is, then we, Cabin Five, the children of War, stand with the Lord of the Sea." Her voice dropped to a low, menacing tone as she added, keeping her eyes locked on Cabin Six, "We will not tolerate any false accusations or slander against him."

For a moment, the shock of that declaration left the crowd of demigods—hundreds of them—utterly silent.

Then the silence shattered as Malcolm, a cold smile on his lips, retorted, “Then we, Cabin Six, children of Wisdom, stand with the King of the gods.”

“This is unwise,” Luke declared loudly before any more cabins could start dividing themselves or, worse, before Athena and Ares cabins ignited an actual fight that could escalate into a Camp-wide war. Once he had their attention, he quickly added, “We need to stand together now more than ever. We’re demigods, and our primary concern should be Camp Half-Blood and our own safety. War isn’t certain, and it may well be resolved before any real conflict begins.” Then, to his surprise, he uttered something he never thought he would say, but it seemed the only thing that could penetrate their thick heads: “Let’s trust the gods. They haven’t contacted us for a reason.”

“I agree,” Lee stepped forward, his expression unusually serious. “This is hasty. Our parents haven’t spoken to us about this for a reason—there might still be a chance for peace. That boy, the son of the Flooder, was sent on a quest recently. We can only assume it’s related to this situation and that it’s an attempt to return what was stolen.”

“Or maybe he’ll hide it!” someone shouted, and a chorus of voices chimed in, echoing the sentiment.

“We can’t know for sure if Percy is the thief,” Luke countered, his gaze sweeping over the frowning campers as he adopted his best disappointed expression, which managed to quiet them somewhat. With a sigh, he added, “Besides, that kid only found out he was a demigod a couple of days ago—how could he possibly pull off something so outrageous?”

“Which isn’t concrete proof he isn’t the thief either,” Malcolm countered, his voice serious.

“Malcolm,” Luke said, turning to face him with a frown, “your sister—your head counselor—is on this quest with Percy. Are you suggesting she’s working with the possible thief?”

A barely noticeable flinch was the only indication that Luke's words had struck a chord before Malcolm quickly composed himself.

With pure conviction in his voice, he retorted, “Annabeth will do the right thing. She’ll uncover the truth and come back as a hero.”

Luke furrowed his brows even deeper, momentarily taken aback by Malcolm’s unwavering, if slightly naive, belief.

It was absurd, and honestly, a little sad, that the demigods had been reduced to this at the first sign of conflict—fighting over something that had nothing to do with them. They weren’t gods, they were mortals. If anything, they should be uniting to protect themselves and their Camp, focusing on solving the problem rather than adding to it by taking sides in a divine squabble.

Clarisse snorted, crossing her arms as she taunted, “Only if your little princess isn’t working with this supposed thief, smartass.” With a mocking smirk, she added, “And by your logic, if the Flooder and his son are the culprits, what are the chances Miss Princess is innocent when she’s out there with him?”

The girl didn’t actually believe that scrawny kid, Percy, was the thief—much less Annabeth. Luke knew that for sure. But here she was, seizing the opportunity to needle her rival cabin. It was infuriating how she was so quick to sabotage his attempts at diplomacy, not caring how much worse she was making things.

Malcolm shot Clarisse a venomous glare as he marched forward, closing the distance until their noses nearly touched. In a low, dangerous voice, he muttered, “I dare you to say that again, brute.”

With a mocking tilt of her head, Clarisse laughed and asked, “And if I do? What are you going to do about it?”

Behind them, their cabins bristled with tension, glares exchanged like daggers, as if they were all waiting for a signal to leap in and start fighting.

The surrounding demigods watched with wide eyes, some nervous, others eager for the chaos to start.

Glancing back for just a moment, Luke assessed his own cabin.

They were all tense, almost ready to bolt—better to run than get caught up in an unnecessary fight. Still, he couldn’t shake his focus away from his two suspects. Their reactions mirrored the others, but he scrutinized them more closely, even as guilt gnawed at him.

His concern for his friends and how quickly things had spiraled out of control pushed those feelings aside, if only for now.

Luke needed to identify the enemy agent, regardless of his own feelings on the matter. His brats were at risk, and he couldn’t allow a moment of weakness to jeopardize their safety.

Chris shifted nervously on his feet, his wide eyes darting between the two arguing cabins as if he were plotting an escape route. In contrast, Ethan seemed more composed, but Luke could see the tension in his shoulders. When their eyes met, Ethan flinched, quickly looking down at the ground and twisting his hands—a sight that made Luke's heart clench slightly.

Shaking his head to dispel the feeling swirling in his chest, Luke refocused on the other cabins, the ones watching the standoff with bated breath.

His two little cousins looked outraged, their chubby, angelic faces twisted into scowls as they glared at Malcolm. Their allegiance was clearly with Percy, despite all the obstacles—whining and complaining, really—Mr. D kept throwing in their way.

His uncle would never forgive him if he let the twins get dragged into this circus, no matter how much Luke thought their loyalty was cute.

Fixing his gaze on them until they noticed, Luke shot them a *look* and subtly shook his head to signal that they shouldn't get involved. Pollux and Castor made faces in protest, but when Luke raised his brows, they sighed and grudgingly began to slip behind the other demigods—good.

Hearing a whistle, Luke turned to find Lee, who gestured with a slight point to his own chest before directing his finger toward Luke. Feeling a wave of relief, Luke nodded in acknowledgment.

At least he had someone willing to stand by him if things went south, and judging by the tension radiating from the Athena and Ares cabins, that seemed inevitable.

Really, he wished Chiron was here to help, but he was busy with something involving the Camp's strawberry business, and Mr. D was likely napping or off at some party—or whatever he did when he vanished from Camp.

Luke conveniently ignored the possibility that it could be another emergency meeting.

There were already too many problems on his plate, and he didn't want to think of adding more; he was anxious and stressed enough as it was.

Finally, he turned to Inês, noticing her slight shake of the head and the conflict in her eyes before she gestured toward Clarisse with her chin.

Her decision was disappointing but not unexpected.

Cabins Ten and Five always stood together—after all, Love and War were mirrors of each other, intrinsically linked. They represented the extremes of human experience, each as brutal as the other, yet even within that savagery lay a certain beauty.

Wasn't love a type of war, fought within oneself? And wasn't war itself made possible only because love existed in the first place?

One could not exist without the other.

In that brief moment, as Luke pushed down his disappointment in his friend's choice, a line was crossed.

Slowly, as if savoring the taste of her words, Clarisse drawled, "Annabeth could be the thief just as much as little Prissy could."

Widening his eyes, Malcolm stared at Clarisse for a moment, disbelief etched on his face as he processed her audacity. Then, fury began to take hold, his gray eyes darkening until they mirrored the stormy sky over Camp Half-Blood the day Zeus had made his displeasure known, when a storm had crossed the magical barriers for the first time in years.

Tensing up, Luke kept his hands behind his back while signaling for his cabin to discreetly move away.

Without warning, Malcolm swung his hand and backhanded Clarisse.

A moment of silence hung in the air as everyone watched the girl slowly turn her face back to Malcolm. She calmly lifted a hand to her nose, pulling it away to examine the redness for a beat before raising her eyes—dark red and filled with fury—to glare at him.

To his credit, he didn't flinch under the weight of her stare.

Then, she screamed.

Behind her, Cabin Five roared in unison and rushed forward, only to be met halfway by the full force of Cabin Six.

Luke cursed loudly.

"Cabin Eleven!" Luke shouted, stepping between the chaos and his campers, his voice urgent as he gestured for them to retreat. His gaze stayed locked on the brawl erupting in the center. "Go back inside! Now!"

He heard, rather than saw, his cabin scrambling to obey, his attention consumed by the chaos unfolding before him. Luke's mind raced, desperate to come up with a solution to this mess, but he knew it was almost impossible to stop the violence now.

Once the group had reached this breaking point, it was like a hive mind—there was no pulling it back.

As he kept his eyes on the brawls erupting in the center, Luke noticed some of the other cabins following his lead, retreating to the safety of their own spaces. But not all of them. Some still lingered, unwilling or too stubborn to back down.

Cabin Ten had aligned with Cabin Five, teaming up to target the children of Athena. Meanwhile, a few Apollo kids were trying to step in and break up the fights—only to catch stray punches for their trouble, Luke noted grimly. The rest of Cabin Seven was busy tending to the injured, their faces bloodied and dazed, yet still contorted in expressions of rage, almost as if they were caught in a frenzy.

It reminded him of Dionysus, and for a fleeting moment, he wished the god would show up and threaten to turn them all into dolphins just to end this riot.

Scanning the frenzied horde for those who had sparked this completely avoidable situation, Luke spotted Clarisse chasing after Malcolm.

Her nose bled freely, staining the lower half of her face, yet she seemed oblivious to the pain, single-mindedly focused on catching the son of Athena. At the same time, Malcolm darted across the makeshift battlefield, weaving through the chaos and using others as obstacles to hinder her pursuit.

Luke noted that he was also taking advantage of the situation to launch sneak attacks whenever Clarisse became too distracted, employing some sort of guerrilla tactics. While the hits didn't seem to inflict serious damage, they were clearly wearing her down.

With a scowl, he attempted to march toward them, but the mass of demigods fighting formed a tumultuous sea between him and his objective—a violent sea of children pummeling one another.

Still, he tried.

Luke pushed through the chaos, sidestepping glancing blows as demigods missed their targets and nearly hit him instead. He was doing a decent job of it, staying light-footed amidst the mayhem.

But as he neared Clarisse, he let his focus slip, eager to reach her faster, and that's when he got sloppy.

A sudden blow he hadn't seen coming slammed into his face, the force revealing the raw strength of a child of Ares—even the younger ones were unfairly strong.

Pain erupted at the point of impact, and for a moment, Luke almost turned back, his anger threatening to spill over as his self-control and patience began to fray.

Here he was, trying to fix a problem he never wanted in the first place—one he had actively tried to prevent—and it had only boiled over because these little fools refused to listen to him.

And what was his reward for all this trouble? A surprise punch to the face?

Trying to rein in his anger, Luke wrestled with the emotions swirling inside him, focusing on slow, steady breaths to cool the simmering heat in his blood.

He had to get through to Clarisse and Malcolm, making those two little pests rein in their cabins and put an end to this riot.

Suddenly, a hand landed on his arm, slicing through the haze of anger. He turned to see Lee, his amber eyes scrutinizing Luke's face with furrowed brows.

Without a word, Lee began to pull him toward a more controlled area of the battlefield.

There, Luke spotted Inês, her eyes wide as she stared at the chaos around her, paralyzed by the violence.

Beside his friend, her younger sisters huddled close.

Right in front of her, Drew stood with a fierce scowl, shouting at anyone who dared approach, regardless of who they were. Each time she yelled, the nearby campers—most from the Athena cabin—would get a glazed look in their eyes, obey her command to leave, and then, moments later, shake their heads in brief confusion.

A bit further away, Luke noted with surprise that Silena was in the thick of it too, surprisingly aggressive as she chased away the brawlers that got too close to them—a stark contrast to her usual gentle nature.

For a moment, he was taken aback by the sight. Then it hit him—Inês was highly sensitive to the emotions of those around her.

Concern washed over him as he realized that this riot, teeming with negativity, was likely overwhelming her senses and leaving her disoriented.

Rushing forward, Luke yanked his arm free from Lee's grip and made his way toward Inês, sidestepping Silena, who seemed dazed and more likely to punch him before recognizing him.

Just as he was within reach, Drew stepped in front of him, glaring fiercely. Her mouth began spewing insults that should never come from a twelve-year-old girl. But then she recognized him, and her demeanor shifted completely. The mask of the fierce, brave girl slipped, revealing a flicker of fear in her wide eyes, even as she stood defensively in front of her sister.

*Protective,* Luke noted with approval, even as his concern for his friend weighed heavily on him.

"How's your sister?" he asked urgently, his gaze flicking between Inês and the chaos surrounding them.

He ignored Lee's presence as the other boy finally caught up, swatting away Lee's hands when he tried to examine the bruised part of his face.

There were more pressing concerns now.

"She was fighting one of Cabin Six's campers," Drew replied, her voice trembling slightly as she cast an uncertain glance at her sister. "Then she just… stopped and froze."

"I see," Luke muttered, moving in closer as he continued to study his friend.

She was pale, hands trembling as her eyes darted restlessly across the battlefield, wide yet unseeing. Her shoulders hunched, as if trying to make herself smaller—o*r perhaps buckling under the weight of the emotions swirling around them,* Luke thought somberly. Even her breaths came shallow, as if a rock pressed down on her chest. She remained rooted to the spot, her body language tense and uncertain, caught between the instinct to flee and the urge to fight, leaving her frozen in place.

"Inês," he called, reaching out to grab her arm. The contact seemed to ground her, making her blink and slowly turn to face him, her eyes beginning to clear a little. "You need to go back to your cabin. Stay there."

"No," she protested, a hint of defiance in her glare, even as she swayed slightly, a bead of sweat trickling down her forehead. "I'm not leaving. I won't run."

"You can hardly stand without getting overwhelmed by all the emotions emanating from them."

“What does it say if the head counselor of Cabin Ten, allies of Cabin Five, just turns tail and runs back to her cabin, leaving her younger siblings and charges out here fighting because she can’t handle a little negativity, Luke?” Inês retorted, her brows furrowing in frustration at both herself and him. She flinched as another wave of emotions hit her. “It’ll just make us look even more pathetic than everyone already thinks we are.”

“You’re not pathetic. None of you are,” he corrected her firmly, though he couldn’t argue against her point.

As much as he hated to admit it, she wasn’t wrong.

The ongoing impression at Camp was that the children of Aphrodite were shallow and useless, only focused on their appearances and indifferent to anything physical.

It was *ridiculous*.

They were demigods, after all—monsters hunted them just like every other camper. And as the children of one of the Twelve Olympians, their scent was stronger than that of a minor god’s kid. They had to learn how to fight to survive, just like the demigods from the other cabins.

But if Inês ran away, it would only worsen the perception of her cabin—no matter her reasons.

As the head counselor, she was the leader, and if the leader couldn’t handle it, what did that say about the rest of her siblings?

“Thank you, Luke, but you know how it is. I have to stay,” she sighed, wincing as she pressed her hands to her temples. “Just... give me a moment, and I’ll be fine.”

Feeling useless, Luke stood by her side, watching the chaos around them with a keen eye, as if standing guard over her.

This time, he didn’t protest when Lee, that stubborn man, raised a hand to touch the bruise on his cheek once again.

A golden glow enveloped Lee's hand, prompting Luke to close his eyes against the brightness. As the chanting in Ancient Greek went on, he felt the pain start to fade into memory.

Once the bruise was healed, Inês coincidentally declared, “I’m good now. Let’s go.”

Throwing a vexed look at her, which she ignored, Luke waved away Lee and turned his attention back to the chaos, scanning the battlefield for his targets.

“I’m going to find Clarisse and Malcolm to put an end to this little circus show they started. So, Inês, it’s best if you stay with Lee.”

Instantly, Lee furrowed his brows, glancing between Inês and Luke, clearly conflicted, while Luke raised an eyebrow in response, silently daring him to protest.

With a resigned sigh, his friend finally relented, clearly swayed by his unimpressed expression. “Fine, I’ll help her.”

Nodding, Luke didn’t give them a chance to speak before he jumped back into the fray, more alert now to avoid any surprise, accidental blows to his face.

He kept a sharp eye on his surroundings, weaving through the fighting demigods as he scanned the area, never staying still long enough for any bloodthirsty little beast to get a chance to pick a fight with him.

Before long, Luke spotted his two little pests.

Clarisse looked worse for wear, her face bruised and bleeding, but that vicious smile only made her seem more intimidating. Malcolm didn’t fare much better; he sported a black eye and pressed a hand against his ribs, likely from a recent hit.

It seemed she had finally managed to corner him, or maybe the son of Athena had decided it was time to confront her head-on.

Either way, they were no longer darting around like a violent game of tag; they were fully engaged in beating the hell out of each other.

This made Luke's job easier, especially since he didn’t have to chase them through an uncontrolled crowd of demigods anymore—he’d even taken a punch in the chaos for his efforts.

*The indignity.*

Seizing the opportunity before they could start fighting again, Luke rushed to Clarisse’s side and grabbed her wrists to stop her from lunging at Malcolm. The sudden grip caught her off guard, triggering her instinct to retaliate.

For a brief moment, they wrestled, and Luke couldn’t help but feel a bit embarrassed by how tough it was; children of Ares were *strong*.

But after a struggle, he finally managed to restrain her.

“You two!” Luke exclaimed, breathless and sweating, his anger at the stubborn kids eclipsing everything else. “Stop this foolishness right now!”

“He slapped me!” Clarisse retorted, her tone sulky, as if Luke were taking candy away from her—completely out of place given the situation.

“And you almost broke my ribs!” Malcolm shot back, wincing as he yelled, a trace of very real anger simmering beneath his pain.

“Do you even realize what you’ve done?” Luke hissed, his patience wearing thin as he watched their childish antics. “You’ve started a Camp-wide conflict, splitting the cabins and making the tension even worse over something we don’t even have all the facts on.” Leaning

in, eyes narrowed, he continued, “There’s no coming back from this now, and just so it’s clear, it’s on you two.”

They both flinched at his words; Malcolm’s eyes widened as realization hit him, draining the color from his face as he grasped the consequences of his actions. Clarisse, on the other hand, crossed her arms and averted her gaze to the ground, her expression a stubborn scowl.

Luke felt a little bad from their reactions, but he couldn’t bring himself to regret his words, no matter how harsh they were.

The next few days would be difficult, to say the least; he could already predict that. All because two kids couldn’t keep their antagonism in check and think before they divided the cabins and riled everyone up.

Now, fights would keep breaking out until the gods settled their matter, and who knew how their parents would react to all of this.

He dreaded it already, but Luke thought he really should reach out to his father to see if he had any information on the gods’ side of things.

It *might* help him stay informed and give him a better chance of managing this pack of rabid demigod children, maybe even nudge things away from chaos.

Suddenly, a familiar voice sliced through the air like a drawn bow, poised to unleash an arrow.

“What is the meaning of this?” Chiron exclaimed over the chaos, his voice cutting through the noise and instantly silencing the campers.

An awkward quiet settled over the common area, broken only by the occasional pained groan.

Beside the centaur, whose face wore a stern expression of disappointment and disbelief—like he couldn’t believe what had happened in the short time he was gone—stood the familiar figure of Peter.

With his arms crossed and long black hair tied back in a ponytail that flowed dramatically, Peter wore an unreadable expression as his rust-colored eyes scanned his siblings. His gaze moved slowly from one to another, causing the brats to shrink back under the weight of his scrutiny.

*Yes, brats, feel the shame,* Luke thought, a surge of vindication washing over him.

By his side, Clarisse tensed, her eyes darting wildly across the space as Peter marched toward them. Malcolm took the opportunity to sneak away and join his cabin.

Meanwhile, Chiron started to drone on about how this was an embarrassment to the gods or some other equally tiresome lecture, but Luke didn’t bother to listen.

“Luke Castellan,” Peter greeted, his gaze fixed firmly on his sister. After a tense pause—his expression inscrutable—he finally addressed her directly, “Clarisse.”

In a subdued tone, she replied, “Brother.”

“We’ll talk about this later,” Peter said with a serious tone. “Just go do your job as head counselor.”

Not wasting any time, Clarisse complied, practically sprinting toward her cabin, which was filled with campers in various states of disarray.

Luke couldn’t help but feel a hint of satisfied pettiness as he noticed them all chastened, listening to Chiron’s disappointed speech.

“What happened?” Peter immediately asked when Clarisse was out of hearing range, his brow slightly furrowed.

For all Peter’s love of a good brawl, he was also someone who valued discipline and honor, so it must have been shocking for him to see everyone so out of control.

In truth, when the older man was head counselor, Cabin Five could almost be described as well behaved.

Luke kind of missed those days, though he would never admit it out loud.

Pressing his lips together, he considered how to reply. Given that the news was already out, he had little to hide.

With a sigh, Luke explained, “We got word—though I’m not sure how it spread or where it came from—that there’s a war brewing in Olympus.” Lowering his voice, he added, “It’s between the King and the Lord of the Sea.”

Peter stared at him for a moment, then cast a sweeping glance over the gathered demigods, his eyes narrowed.

“It came from inside,” he declared.

"That’s… what I think too," Luke replied, turning his gaze to the scene as well.

He watched the Apollo campers moving through the crowd, healing the bruises of their fellow demigods, their faces marked with annoyance—especially those sporting bruises from stray punches. Lee led them as head counselor, while Inês was surrounded by her own cabin. Among them, Drew stood tall, boasting about her own feats, and Silena hid a smile behind her hand, her gentle demeanor returning now that the fight had settled.

“An enemy agent causing chaos from within is unacceptable. This was a strike against us—an attempt to sow division,” Peter said firmly, his eyes scanning the crowd like a general seeking out spies among his troops.

Luke couldn’t argue with that; it was exactly as Wu had said.

What other reason could there be for such sensitive information to leak out when the situation was so volatile?

Once again, his mind wandered back to who the thief could be, but he chose to not share those thoughts with Peter.

Luke didn't have the heart to do so.

Chapter End Notes

So, it's Athena vs. Ares cabin again. Cabin Six immediately sides with Zeus, and here's Malcolm being a little too hasty with his accusations, which gets Luke thinking he actually prefers Annie—even though she's younger, lol. Meanwhile, Clarisse is all, "If Cabin Six is on that side, we're on the other."

Chaos breaks loose. Luke gets punched and feels like throwing his hands up and letting these little demon brats fend for themselves, lol. But, of course, he's way too responsible for that.

Now, let's talk about the Aphrodite girls. I think this shows three sides of Aphrodite through them: the emotional side with Inês (she can feel emotions, but the downside is being easily overwhelmed), the persuasive side (Drew), and the warlike side (Silena). Unfortunately, Cabin Ten is still seen as weak, and we all know why.

And Peter. Here he is, ready to throw his cabin into the fire for the chaos they helped cause. But things won't be the same after this—the information is out, and the cabins are already riled up.

In any case, thanks for reading! Comments are always appreciated! And it doesn't matter if you're late to the party!

How do you guys think the gods will react to all this?

# Chapter 37: TLT - Doubts

Chapter Summary

> Kronos is starting to make sense, but he's still unsettling, making Luke uncomfortable enough to somehow kick both himself and Kronos out of the dreamscape. When he wakes, the agitation of the aura bothers him so much that he decides a walk might help. Then he gets an idea and heads off to talk to Mr. D.

Chapter Notes

> Another early chapter because I'll be quite busy these days… university is sucking my soul.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Luke was already growing tired of dreaming.

Never in his life had he dreamed so much, and he knew this wasn't some newfound skill; it was an invasion of his dreamscape.

Really, he hated being a demigod in times like this—actually, if he was honest, he hated it most of the time.

How he missed the peaceful existence of being normal. It was so much better than… *this*.

Sitting up from where he'd been lying on the ground—sand, he realized as his hand brushed over it—Luke warily scanned his surroundings, already dreading what he might find.

Strangely, it wasn't the malleable world he shared with Axel when the older man came to test Luke's new ability—not that they ever succeeded in understanding it, let alone replicating what he'd done that day. Nor was it a dark, empty void, or even one of those awful memory loops Kronos occasionally showed him.

It looked like a real place, which was alarming enough, especially since it was somewhere Luke didn't recognize.

He was on an island, and he had never been on one before in either of his lives.

Before him stretched an endless horizon of ocean—*not entirely endless,* he corrected himself, noting a valley peeking out in the distance, too far away to make out any specifics. The water was crystalline and pristine, a turquoise so pure it glinted like precious jewels, almost

transparent. Surrounding him was a vibrant forest, its lush green contrasting against the white sand, dotted with coconut trees and large bushes.

Overall, it resembled a tropical paradise. But he hastily reminded himself that this impression was based on just a small part of this strange place he had observed, making it far from accurate.

It could be hell on Earth for all he knew, so he needed to investigate further.

Slowly, Luke rose to his feet, keeping his eyes on the forest behind him, his muscles tense and ready to sprint at the slightest hint of danger.

Nothing happened, so he began to sneak around, choosing to circle the forest while staying on the beach. He was still too wary to venture further into unknown territory, especially into an area filled with trees where he couldn't see any danger approaching.

Luke walked for a while, seeing only the same sights: sea, sand, and trees. The absence of animal noises struck him as strange, and there were no indications that humans had been there before, either.

Where the hell was he?

However, before long, he finally stumbled upon the first sign of civilization since he started wandering—and what a sight it was.

His first thought was how much it looked like Olympus.

It was a Greek city, reminiscent of the ancient ones he only knew from ruins or from Olympus itself. Bright and lively, it shone in all sorts of colors, with statues of heroes—he thought he spotted one of Achilles, based on the brilliant gold of the painted hair and how it fit the descriptions he had read—lining the streets. On each side, Greek houses stood behind the statues, each a sight to see, a glimpse into a time long past.

Unnervingly, though, it was completely silent, which felt entirely out of place for a city as large as this one.

Maybe it was because this was a dream and not real?

Shaking his head, Luke studied the place for a few moments. The longer nothing happened, the more he relaxed his tightly wound nerves. Taking a deep breath, he sneaked closer, pausing every so often, even if he felt a bit stupid for doing so when there was nobody around.

But this was a dreamscape, so anything could happen.

Besides, Luke was almost certain this was the work of Kronos, though he wasn’t sure why the Titan had changed his approach so suddenly.

As he walked around, he took a closer look at the city now that he was actually inside it. The statues were large, mostly depicting heroes, each with their names engraved on the bases—in

Ancient Greek, curiously. The one he had thought was Achilles was indeed a depiction of him, with Patroclus right beside him. Behind them, the houses were also large, resembling mansions; perhaps this was the street of the wealthy?

But there were also statues of the gods, larger and more grandiose than those of the mortals, located in a central area where the streets converged—almost like a small park, if he had to compare it to something.

As strange as it was, he didn't see many of the ones he was used to, like Zeus. However, there was one of his father, and oddly enough, one of Axel's dad, Hypnos, depicting a young man with wings on his brow.

Luke glared at the Hypnos statue, feeling cheated after going through the trouble of getting a symbol from Axel's dad and placing it near his bed for a good night's sleep after his talk with Grandma. He would have preferred something from his own religion, but that didn't seem wise at a Greek demigod summer camp.

Shaking his head, he refocused. The most prominent statues, standing taller than the others, were of Hades and Persephone, with an inscription that read, *King and Queen of the Underworld.*

He paused to study them for a moment, his mind racing to connect the dots as his suspicion of where he was grew with each passing second.

Choosing to ignore it for the time being—this was a dream, after all—Luke continued walking, picking a random street to further his explorations, finding much of the same things he had already encountered.

At least until he came to a stop in front of a temple.

It was a typical-looking temple, like those from Ancient Greece—rectangular, made of marble, and full of columns—but for some reason, Luke felt unnerved.

Making a decision, since that was the only lead he did have, Luke entered it. There, he was immediately met by two gigantic statues of a man and a woman.

The woman was seated on a throne, dressed like a queen in a long tunic—a *peplos*, he thought, if he remembered correctly from the books he'd read—that seemed to be woven from a thousand leaves. Her hair was gathered in a low bun, topped with a crown. In her hand, she held a scepter, and at her feet, two stone lions lay resting. Though she looked majestic, even stately, there was a gentle quality to her, with a kind smile gracing her lips.

Like her, the man sat on a throne, but he seemed far less approachable, his face stern and cold. Instead of lions, two massive snakes—like constrictors—coiled at his feet. He wore a robe draped over part of his torso, leaving one arm and part of his chest exposed—a *himation*, Luke recalled. His hair was curly, his beard pointed, and in his hands, he held a sickle.

Locking eyes on the sickle, he felt a slow wave of realization wash over him, yet he remained right where he was.

If Kronos wanted him to come here and see his statue, so be it. Besides, Luke doubted he could force his way out of this dreamscape anyway.

Suddenly, the statue's eyes lit up, glowing with a brutal golden hue that was so bright it hurt to look at.

*Little demigod, you have not run,* the voice noted, echoing around him with a tone that felt vaguely curious, if not more amused than anything.

“Would that have worked?” Luke asked, crossing his arms behind his back as he fought to keep his voice steady.

*No,* Kronos replied, a low chuckle resonating that made the hair on the back of Luke’s neck stand on end. *It wouldn’t have. Unless…* The voice paused for a moment, as if considering something, then continued, *Unless you pull off that little trick of yours again, demigod.*

Keeping his gaze fixed on the statue, Luke remained silent.

He had nothing to say about what he had done; he still didn’t understand it, and even if he did, he still wouldn’t share it with this creature.

*A curious power,* Kronos mused, not seeming to mind his silence.

But the interest in his voice only made Luke feel more uncomfortable, the sensation building inside him.

*As noteworthy as that is, that’s not why I brought you here,* the Titan declared after a moment, the statue’s eyes glowing even brighter. *Tell me, mortal, do you trust the gods?*

Luke considered the question, his unease growing with every second.

He had to tread carefully; being too honest about his lack of admiration for the Olympians might come off as agreement with the Titan's views. But he also couldn’t act completely indifferent—lying wasn’t exactly his strong suit.

Skirting the truth? He could manage that. But outright lying? That was a different story altogether.

Besides, if the Titan believed he could still sway Luke, it meant he would try to persuade him —perhaps without pushing too… hard just yet. That might lead him to reveal something incriminating. It didn’t need to be major; even a small detail could be useful.

“I trust them to do as they should,” Luke replied diplomatically, his voice even.

*What an interesting choice of words,* Kronos mused, a hint of amusement lacing his voice. ‘*As they should.’*

Luke twisted his hands behind his back, pressing his lips together as he once again chose to stay silent.

*As of now, you must know the Olympians are on the verge of war,* the Titan went on, his tone dripping with satisfaction—he wasn't even trying to hide it, Luke noticed. *Isn't it strange that you're only hearing about it now, after months of silence and unusual weather?*

"This information came to us by unknown means," Luke answered stiffly, tightening his grip on his wrist.

*Indeed,* Kronos replied, his voice softening as he added, the tone suggestive and perhaps even casual, but laced with malice beneath the surface, *The gods weren't the ones to share it, but an outsider.*

Yes, the information had come from Kronos' spy inside Camp, he knew, but he wouldn't comment on it. Besides, the Titan had practically confessed, and Luke made a mental note of it.

Kronos was confident, and *that* made him uneasy.

But he had to place his trust in Percy, Annabeth, and Grover, trust that they could retrieve the bolt, even with the changes from how it went in the books.

And above all, he had to trust in himself and his ability to adapt and resolve any problems that appeared on his end.

Slowly, Luke forced his taut muscles to relax, though discomfort still crawled beneath his skin, rising closer to the surface.

Choosing his words carefully, he said, "We received it all the same."

For a moment, Kronos was silent, the only sound in the room Luke's own rapid heartbeat pounding in his ears. Then, the Titan spoke. *And what good did it do? Chaos reigned among you little demigods as soon as it got out.* His voice dropped, turning almost conspiratorial. *Fighting the battles of immortals who couldn't care less about them.*

Luke pressed his lips together, thinning them into a hard line. "It has been handled."

*Has it?* the Titan mocked, as though he knew something Luke didn't.

But Luke knew exactly what this creature had done—he knew it all.

*It doesn't seem like it's been solved when fights keep breaking out among you little demigods, does it?* Kronos continued, his voice deceptively gentle, as if he were trying to help.

Yet, beneath that facade lay an annoyance—a displeasure that ignited Luke's nerves and made him tense all over again.

Silently cursing, he realized that he had slipped, becoming too aggressive in his defensive stance and revealing too clearly that he didn't share this creature's views.

Luke needed to dial back his behavior and play it safe.

As much as he didn't want the Titan to keep haunting him, he still hadn't figured out how to get rid of him for good. Until then, he had to play along; after all, he hadn't obtained any new information from him just yet.

*You little demigods are still playing the gods' game,* Kronos went on, his tone laced with disappointment, yet a genuine undercurrent of displeasure simmered beneath it.

Luke wondered if the Titan wanted him to think he was so much different from the gods, that he was the better choice. Truthfully, he didn't believe there was much of a difference; one was simply the older generation, but the essence remained the same.

Immortals who viewed mortals as mere playthings, completely unworthy of being regarded as people in their own right.

Wasn't it ironic? The gods and Titans saw mortals as little more than insects, yet they depended on those very insects to carry out their will.

They had to play nice; they had to pretend.

A quote he once read in a past life came to mind: Needing to dominate others is to depend on others. The boss is a dependent[1].

*It must be humiliating,* Luke thought, a flicker of satisfaction growing within him, mingling with the unease that still lingered beneath his skin.

"The gods are our parents," he replied as neutrally as possible, concealing his discomfort and putting forth only a token resistance.

He wanted to see how the Titan would try to win him over.

*Ah, demigod,* Kronos sighed, and a cold breeze swept into the room, rattling Luke's clothes and hair, making him close his eyes. *Can't you see the gods are responsible for this? They sit on their thrones in Olympus, watching their children nearly kill each other, and they do nothing.* With another heavy sigh, he continued, his voice pressing down on Luke's shoulders, slithering over his skin. *They don't care about you. They didn't care about me, their father.*

Ignoring the pain of the confirmation that the gods simply watched as their children fought battles not their own—he knew it was true, but it still hurt to accept that a parent could be so uncaring—Luke shuffled in place, a flicker of disbelief at the Titan's last words.

After a moment of hesitation, he asked, "But, sir… didn't you eat your children?"

*Because they would have betrayed me,* Kronos snapped, his voice echoing off the walls. The wind howled more violently, darkening the room and intensifying the cold as the Titan's rage surged. It seemed the Titan took a deep breath, drawing the winds toward the statue and diminishing the darkness and chill. His voice softened to a silky whisper as he continued, *They have slandered me, demigod. They teach in your little Camp that I was a tyrant, that mortals were unhappy under my rule. But those are lies.*

As a drop of sweat trickled down the back of his neck, Luke felt discomfort surge beneath his skin, growing almost unbearable. He felt stuck, like a rabbit caught in a snake's gaze, aware that one wrong move could be his last.

And so he listened; it was all he could do.

*My age was the Golden Age,* Kronos declared, his voice laced with disdain as he spoke his other son's name, *Chiron might tell you this is all propaganda, that I didn't treat my subjects fairly or whatever else he thinks will undermine me. But none of that is true. In my era, mortals were happy; they didn't age, and when they died, it was a gentle sleep free of pain. They lived without sorrow, knowing only abundance.* His tone turned bitter as he continued, *How is my son any different from me? Wasn't Zeus the one who punished Prometheus for loving his creations? Didn't my son fear, just as I did, that he would be overthrown? Didn't he trick and swallow his first wife, poor Metis, due to a prophecy, just like I did?* Calming himself, he added, his tone softening, *You're a smart mortal, Luke Castellan. You can see their lies too.*

Indeed, Luke could see it. He had recognized the inconsistencies since he first arrived at Camp Half-Blood—the selective information they were given and the way the demigods regarded their parents as infallible.

Even so…

*Maybe you don't think I'm that smart at all,* Luke thought unkindly, *if you expect me to accept what you say when the same kind of propaganda could easily be turned back on you.*

Even so, doubt lingered, and he loathed himself for it.

"Information in my cabin is scarce," Luke finally answered.

A sharp laugh resonated, like two knives scraping against each other, sending a chill down his spine and making the hairs on the back of his neck stand up.

*Scarce?* Kronos echoed, his voice swelling with power and pressing down on Luke like a physical weight. With a steely tone, he continued, *Do not play the fool, demigod.*

Luke's heart pounded in his ears, drowning out everything else as Kronos continued speaking, his voice grating on Luke's already frayed nerves. A heavy knot settled in his gut, making him feel almost nauseous, as if he might burst at any moment.

Inside his mind, the only thought that echoed was: *I want him to go away.*

Then, suddenly, that same sensation he had felt that day surged within him, crashing out like an uncontrollable wave.

Luke had only a brief moment to witness the world around him disappear.

Kronos' voice was abruptly silenced, and the glow in his statue's eyes dimmed, rendering them just stone. Next to him, the eyes of Rhea's statue—he was almost certain it was her—shone gold for an instant before everything around him began to break down.

The temple began to crumble, its walls cracking, but just when it seemed everything would collapse and crush him, darkness closed in around him.

Luke jolted awake with a gasp, clutching his chest as he struggled to catch his breath.

Within his chest, the aura stirred restlessly, as if reaching for something. It felt intent, tendrils extending and probing around—*searching*, it seemed to be searching for something.

In an instant, a wave of anger mixed with a primal panic—something he could barely admit to himself, even in the darkest corners of his mind—washed over Luke at the invasive sensation.

*Why?*

Why had Mercury put a piece of his essence inside him? Why was Kronos after him?

*Why couldn't he have a normal life?*

Hastily sitting up in bed, he raked a hand through his hair, further tangling it into what he noted, somewhat distractedly, was probably starting to resemble a yellow bird's nest. The physical sensation grounded him a bit, making the confusion feel a little more bearable and helping him ignore the aura insistently shifting inside him.

Still unnerved by what had just happened, he refused to give it a shred of attention.

His patience had run dry.

Luke had already borne this burden for five years, unwillingly.

*He wanted it out.*

But as he thought that, the aura stirred more violently, digging deeper and moving restlessly, as if it were growing more agitated.

Luke felt a surge of irritation at that, so he simply stood up, slipped on his slippers, and ignored his cabinmates' puzzled stares as he walked out.

It was afternoon, the brief window of free time before dinner.

Tired from the chaos of the past few days, he had seized the opportunity to catch a little sleep —and to escape the tense mood hanging over Camp, if he was being honest with himself.

Yet even in his dreams, he couldn't find a moment of reprieve from his problems. In fact, it felt like they multiplied every time he closed his eyes.

Kronos had invaded his dreams again, but this time, he had completely changed his approach.

There were no black voids, no replaying of his memories, no haunting voice from the beyond claiming the gods were to blame for it all and asking if he wanted revenge.

Luke sensed some hidden motive behind this change—one he couldn't quite identify but knew was there. The Titan was far too crafty not to be plotting something, and the way he was playing nice with him felt unsettling, to say the least.

First, the dreamscape had been set in a strange environment he had never encountered before, and he suspected it was somewhere in the Underworld. The statues honoring the gods scattered throughout the city were all chthonic deities, with the figures of the Queen and King serving as the most obvious signs for this conclusion.

Why didn't the Titan show him Tartarus, the place most familiar to him since his pieces were scattered there? Was he trying to avoid scaring Luke away?

Second, as much as he hated to admit it, Kronos made a strange kind of sense when he finally took the time to discuss his points with Luke. No matter how hard he tried to find flaws in the Titan's arguments, he couldn't pinpoint anything that was completely untrue; while it might not have been the whole truth, it definitely wasn't a lie either.

He knew Camp was terrible at providing unbiased information; his first visit to Cabin Seven had shown him that, and it was only reinforced when he finally got access to Athena's cabin.

Everything felt selectively curated, with the darker aspects of the gods either downplayed or justified, sometimes even oversimplified. It made sense in a way, considering it was children reading it, but he seriously doubted that immortal beings cared about—or even understood—the idea of age-appropriate content.

*It was disturbing.*

But Luke quickly reminded himself that he couldn't trust the Titan.

So what if he said things that made sense?

That didn't make him any better than the gods. He was immortal too, just as chained to his nature as the others were.

Shaking his head, Luke tried to push these thoughts out of his mind as best he could. They weren't helping the current situation and were only making him more anxious—an anxious Luke was far less productive than a calm one.

There was little he could do about it; he *needed* to focus on what he could actually do.

Steeling himself, he made a decision and pivoted toward the Big House, taking in the other demigods along the way as if he couldn't help but notice their behavior.

The kids were on edge, casting wary glances at each other as if the others were beasts ready to pounce at any moment. Sadly, this unease wasn't far from the truth given the current state of Camp Half-Blood.

Thankfully, Peter was around, acting as a buffer for his fight-hungry siblings—Cabin Five was always the main problem when it came to brawls. The little boars had been surprisingly

well-behaved lately, but skirmishes still broke out pretty often, especially since Peter couldn't be everywhere at once, and those brats were all too eager to butt heads with Cabin Six.

Unfortunately, that aggression was starting to bleed over into the others, and Luke feared they might follow the lead of the war cabins, splitting into factions.

If that happened, there would be no way to reverse the situation.

As Luke approached the Big House, Chiron emerged, his face etched with stress. The centaur's wrinkles seemed more pronounced, and his brow was deeply furrowed with concern.

"Good afternoon, Chiron," Luke greeted, his tone lacking enthusiasm.

He could tell exactly why the centaur was acting like this, and he sympathized—he was suffering from the same problem.

Being the only adult demigod living at Camp could feel like a curse sometimes…

"Hello, Luke," Chiron replied hurriedly, his gaze fixed intently on the cabins, a slight jitteriness evident in his demeanor. "As much as I'd like to chat, I need to ensure there aren't any fights breaking out—and if there are, I'll have to break them up. We'll speak later."

Then he was off, galloping away in a hurry, just as a war cry rang out in the distance.

Luke watched the centaur's retreating figure for a moment, feeling a twinge of pity for him—they really weren't getting any peace these days. With a sigh, he turned away and headed for the porch.

There, as usual, sat Mr. D.

This time, he wasn't caught up in his routine game of card but simply staring at the horizon, sipping his Coke. His expression was neutral, which typically meant he was annoyed, the slight furrow in his forehead giving it away.

Luke moved closer, but as always, his uncle didn't acknowledge him. He pulled out a chair next to the god and sat down, silently turning to follow Mr. D's gaze.

From their vantage point, they could see the cabins in the distance, and it was a worrisome sight.

Chiron struggled to separate two young campers—no older than thirteen—who were screaming and scratching at each other's faces. He managed to intervene just in time, but another fight broke out almost immediately, forcing the centaur to rush off again to break it up.

For a long moment, Luke observed the chaos without saying a word, gathering his thoughts.

After a brief hesitation, he finally spoke up. "We are on the verge of starting a real civil war."

"Indeed," Mr. D agreed, his tone unusually serious, eyes fixed on the fights breaking out. With a heavy sigh, he added sarcastically, "*Just* what we needed right now."

Luke shared the sentiment.

It was a disaster that the demigods now knew what was happening on Olympus—especially with a real war brewing, much bigger than these playground scuffles breaking out around Camp.

The thought made him wonder what the gods were doing amidst all this chaos, and his mind drifted to an idea he'd been mulling over for some time: contacting his father to find out what the hell was going on.

Maybe there was something he could find out, something that might actually help in this mess.

He pushed the memory of Kronos' voice from his mind as best he could, forcing himself to ignore the whispers about how the gods had been watching yet didn't care enough to intervene.

"Uncle," Luke began, his voice hesitant as he wet his lips. Gathering his courage, he pressed on, "Do the gods know about..." He gestured vaguely toward the cabins, "...this?"

Dionysus huffed, casting Luke a sideways glance with raised brows. "Do you think they wouldn't? Of course they know," he retorted. "The second the information got out and these brats started acting like wild animals, an emergency meeting was called."

That… wasn't good news.

"And," he hesitated for a moment before continuing, "what was the conclusion?"

Mr. D shot him a *look,* then sighed. "That someone from the inside leaked it," he said, taking a sip of his Coke. "It's the only explanation."

He knew that too; it was the obvious conclusion in this situation, so it wasn't surprising. What truly mattered to him was what the gods planned to do next.

"I agree," Luke muttered, his brows furrowing in concern. He turned to Mr. D, who was staring at him over his Coke, and locked eyes with him. "But how do they plan to solve this?"

"The others are more concerned about finding the little tattletale—and the thief—than controlling their own spawn," his uncle replied with a drawl, snorting lightly. "The list of suspects mostly falls on my satyrs, but there's been chatter about a demigod being involved too—especially due to that hellhound business."

It could only be a demigod; the satyrs were far too loyal—and too scared of Dionysus—to even consider acting out. Besides, Kronos had practically announced it was one of his own agents, too.

Once again, he forced himself to bury his feelings over the gods' lack of interest in resolving the campers' dispute; there were more important things to focus on.

"Is the mood getting… more volatile among the gods as well?" Luke asked, his brow furrowing with concern.

That was his biggest fear—the demigods were one thing, but the gods…

"Your father is doing his best to appease the others for as long as he can. Even with all the tension and the petty conflicts stirred up by this little riot of yours, the gods don't want a war; it would be far too catastrophic," Dionysus explained, taking a sip of his Coke.

That was… good. Really good, actually, and it eased the knot in his chest a bit, but the mention of his father caught his attention.

"Is Father very busy?" he asked, trying to sound casual as he shifted his gaze to the table, dragging a finger across the surface as if it held more interest than the conversation.

Pausing, Uncle D seemed caught off guard by the question. He shot Luke a narrowed glance, and Luke could feel the scrutiny more than see it—his uncle could sense something was off; after all, he was the god of madness, and emotions were his business.

Still, Mr. D's voice remained casual as he replied, "Yes, your father has many duties as the Herald. He's been kept quite busy acting as an intermediary between the King and Poseidon these days."

"I see…" Luke mused, clasping his hands together. Then, adopting a conversational tone, he asked, "Have these duties really kept him away for five years? I didn't realize things had been tense for that long."

Hermes had been absent since Luke was fifteen, and while this explanation was true, it was far from complete.

Luke knew it, and so did Mr. D.

"Many things have happened in the meantime, Lucy; this is just the latest squabble," his uncle sighed dramatically. "The job of a diplomat is never really finished."

How strange it was to emphasize his father's role without offering a straightforward answer.

"A shame," Luke commented flippantly, lifting his gaze to gauge his uncle's expression—Mr. D was studying him intently, as if trying to dissect him. Then, he played his trump card: "I even had a few things to talk to him about this patronage thing…"

Clearly displeased, Mr. D's gaze flicked to the caduceus on his bracelet before he huffed, rolling his eyes in exasperation. Yet he answered nonetheless, "If you bring up that little talk of patron god or whatever, I'm sure he'll come."

"Do you really think so?"

His uncle nodded, studying him for a moment, making Luke clasp his hands tighter to avoid fidgeting under that intense gaze.

Finally, Mr. D asked, "What's with this sudden interest? You never cared about it before."

"I mind now because the situation is getting worse, Uncle," Luke replied seriously, flinching at another scream in the distance. "If my father can fulfill his duties as my patron and offer some guidance, it would help me—and the other demigods under my care."

Humming thoughtfully, Mr. D turned back to survey the Camp. His voice remained neutral as he asked, "You do realize you have your own responsibilities in this arrangement, don't you?"

Luke took a deep breath, letting it out slowly before responding, "I do."

As much as he disliked it, he was willing to endure his father's demands if it could help with the impending war—and, more importantly, provide some solution to the current problem.

And then there was the matter of the dreams too…

Glancing out of the corner of his eye at his uncle, Luke hesitated, his heart pounding in his chest with nervousness. Then he added, "And there's something else—"

He was interrupted by a very familiar voice cutting through the silence like an alarm, hurling insults and screaming challenges.

Turning to look, he saw what he thought was Pollux standing up to another camper, though the distance made it hard to tell for sure. Castor was behind him, not even trying to rein his brother in.

Instantly, Mr. D rose from his seat and marched toward the cabins without so much as a glance back at Luke.

Relief coursed through him—at least he wouldn't have to mention Kronos right *now*—but a flicker of disappointment settled in his chest for some reason.

Brushing these thoughts aside, Luke stood up and moved to the railing, resting his hands on it as he watched Dionysus approach the fighting demigods. He could almost picture his uncle threatening to turn them all into dolphins if they didn't stop with their ridiculous antics.

Suddenly, he heard a voice calling his name from somewhere behind him.

Turning around in an instant, his eyes wide—he couldn't believe someone could sneak up on him—Luke saw the trio emerging from a wall of shimmering mist: an Iris Message.

"Thank God," he breathed, pressing a hand to his chest.

He knew they were alive; the news he had seen at his grandmother's house had confirmed it. But seeing them and talking to them was a whole different thing.

“How are you three?” he asked, taking in their dirty, battered appearances but relieved to see they were still whole.

“We're fine, Luke,” Annabeth replied, rolling her eyes at his concern—the audacity. But a smile played on her lips, one she couldn't completely hide. “Listen, where is Chiron?”

“He’s down in the cabins,” he said, turning back with furrowed brows. “There are some issues that need his attention.”

“What kind of issues?” Grover asked, tilting his head.

“Nothing serious; it’ll be resolved soon enough,” Luke said with a forced smile, attempting to project confidence.

Annabeth narrowed her eyes, and Percy looked just as dubious about that statement. But Luke wasn’t about to spill the Camp’s problems when they needed to focus on stopping a war; it would only distract them from their objective.

After a brief standoff, where he smiled innocently and Annabeth tried to read his mind, she huffed in frustration, finally accepting his silence on the matter.

“We wanted to ask Chiron about something that happened to Percy. A nereid said he needed to go to Santa Monica; it’s his father's wish.”

“And she also mentioned something about presents,” Percy added.

Humming thoughtfully for a moment—he was almost certain this was related to those magic pearls—Luke said, “If it’s your father’s wish, then you have to obey him. Besides, the mention of presents is a good sign; I’m pretty sure it’s something to help you on your quest.”

“This is what I thought, too,” Annabeth mused, wearing that contemplative expression she always got when she was deep in thought.

Percy, on the other hand, looked conflicted. He glanced at Luke, then at the other two, as if he wanted to say something but didn’t want to do it in front of them.

It didn’t escape Luke’s notice that they hadn’t mentioned going to the Underworld to him, so he figured Percy wanted to bring it up.

“So, Percy, have you used my gift yet?”

Obviously, he hadn’t; Pipo was still making a nuisance of himself with the nymphs, and if he had suddenly disappeared, everyone would have noticed—it would be hard not to notice when an oversized dog was suddenly gone.

Annie suddenly paused in her thoughts, furrowing her brows to mutter to herself, “Gift?”

Even Grover looked like he had no idea what Luke was talking about.

Huh, so, for some reason, Percy hadn’t mentioned this little detail to the others.

“Ah, no… not yet,” the boy stuttered, avoiding the gazes of the other two as he fidgeted on his feet.

“Good. Just remember to use it only when you really need to,” Luke said, pretending not to notice the awkwardness on the other side—it wasn’t his problem to deal with. With a wink, he added, “I think you’ll find use for a hellhound soon enough.”

Furrowing her brows, Annabeth shot him a scrutinizing look, which he responded to with a smile. Grover appeared a bit shocked, but Percy, while still looking like someone caught in the act, seemed less surprised than the other two.

Really, it was obvious that they were going to the Underworld. Luke didn’t understand why they were so shocked that he knew.

After all, everyone at Camp suspected Hades had done something, especially after that hellhound incident.

Suddenly, an alarm blared on the kid’s side, snapping their attention away from him to whatever was happening over there.

“Well, kids, take care of yourselves and remember to be careful,” Luke said as the mist began to dissipate.

They promised him they would, but just as Annabeth opened her mouth to say something, the message cut off.

Leaning back against the railing and feeling the wind on his face, Luke gazed out over Camp Half-Blood, his easygoing smile fading as unease crept back in.

Chapter End Notes

1: Needing to dominate others is to depend on others. The boss is a dependent. - it is a quote from Livro do Desassossego by Fernando Pessoa, a Portuguese poet.

So, there are some myths that say Kronos is the ruler of the Isles of the Blessed, and this is kind of a reference to that, especially since it’s said to be on the western edge of the Earth—hence the tropical island, lol. As for Kronos’ temple/sanctuary, I found some references suggesting he had one, maybe as an ancient thing, and that he was worshipped alongside Rhea. That’s another reference I included.

Aside from that, he didn’t exactly lie here. He’s unsettling but still kind of nice, trying to persuade through conversation and manipulation rather than nightmares and fear tactics. And he didn’t exactly lie—the Golden Age being propaganda is a Riordan thing, but I changed it because I really don’t get why a demigod would side with a guy who was an even worse tyrant than the gods. In any case, Luke is staying as neutral as he can, and

the mystery power makes another appearance. He's like: 'You're making sense, but I don't like it.'

The aura thing is reaching a boiling point for Luke. What will happen? We'll see…

There's also another conversation with Mr. D, and yeah, he immediately steps in when it concerns his sons, lol. He definitely thinks any interest in Hermes is bad news since Luke wants nothing to do with his dad—so it's suspicious. But because of the whole patron situation, he can't really do anything about it. And Mr. D doesn't think Luke is the thief. Luke cares too much about the kids and is too cautious to start a war or risk his own hide.

And the trio. Still on their secret mission, so there's careful skirting around the subject, but the kids are fine.

Anyway, thanks for reading! Comments are always appreciated, and it doesn't matter if you're late to the party!

What do you guys think is the deal with the aura?

# Chapter 38: TLT - Gossip

Chapter Summary

> Luke has a mental breakdown, plays with Pipo, then overhears the nymphs talking about things they shouldn't know, has another breakdown, and finally relaxes again with Dean, who is giving Pipo the stinky eye.

Chapter Notes

> Sorry for not having a set date for updates 😢. University is taking up much of my time, and I'm still figuring out which day works best. I can't promise a regular posting schedule, as sometimes I can update earlier depending on my schedule—like when professors randomly decide not to teach, giving me extra time.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Luke felt high-strung, though that didn't quite capture it—the knot deep in his gut, full of frustration and negativity, had settled into something that only seemed to manifest as constant irritation these days.

With the sun beating down on his back and the sounds of nearby brats alerting him, he wandered aimlessly, dodging the kids as soon as he spotted one—even his own brothers.

He was too exhausted from constantly being the one to break up fights and deal with the chaos that had erupted at Camp to want to be near any of them right now.

Actually, if he was being completely honest, he wasn't alone in this; Chiron was another adult trying to keep the order, and now that Peter was around, he was helping too. But that didn't change much of how Luke saw the situation—they were still just a few adults, completely outnumbered in a summer camp full of superpowered children eager to fight each other.

Each of them was overworked, and Luke felt that keenly.

In the end, it left him feeling moody, and he couldn't confidently trust himself around any of the children given how he was feeling. He was too irritable, too on edge, too exhausted, and all of it made it far too easy for him to snap at others—something he was actively trying to avoid.

So, he kept his distance.

It was for the best.

However, that wasn't the only source of his unease; Luke had to acknowledge that he was still rattled by his conversation with Kronos in that dream. Ever since, the Titan's words had echoed in his mind on an endless loop, no matter how hard he tried to block them out.

The more he fought to stop thinking about it, the more impossible it became—his efforts in avoiding it just seemed to make it worse.

And it fueled his restlessness, making him more shorter-tempered.

With a remorseful sigh, Luke remembered that he had already snapped at quite a few people—thankfully, none of them were kids, though he feared it was only a matter of time.

He had lost his cool with Lee more than once, especially since the other man's clinginess had irked him in a way he couldn't quite explain. Then there was Inês, who had only been trying to help; luckily, she had forgiven him.

Really, it was ridiculous for him to be so affected, so torn.

He knew, from reading the books and his own deep-seated distrust of anything immortal, that he shouldn't give Kronos even a sliver of attention—any amount would be too much.

Yet here he was, that creature's voice echoing endlessly in his mind, leaving him feeling unnerved and confused.

*He hated himself for it.*

Still, the Titan had struck on some wounds Luke didn't even know he had, and Kronos made a twisted sort of sense, especially given the current state of Camp Half-Blood—the gods seemed more concerned with uncovering who had shattered the illusion of control and calm rather than addressing the very real problems affecting the campers.

That neglect from their parents only seemed to prove Kronos's words right.

Yet, Luke couldn't help but wonder if that was the Titan's plan from the start—a way to twist the situation and make his arguments seem more compelling. It was almost as if Kronos had orchestrated everything, using the chaos at Camp as undeniable evidence to back up his claims.

After all, Kronos was known as the Crooked One.

As if snapped from his haze by the thought, Luke's eyes widened in realization—he reminded himself that the Titan had only ever criticized the gods during the dream invasions. Not once had he given a reason why he'd be a better option or how he could truly help the demigods; just some vague promise of revenge.

All he did in their conversation was claim that the gods didn't care about their children, insisting they were no better than Kronos himself.

And didn’t that just prove the Titan was equally as bad?

By comparing himself to the Olympians in a way that suggested they were all the same, he was only exposing his own flaws.

With a hint of desperation, he clenched his fist over his mouth, burying the thought deep in his mind, anchoring it firmly in his consciousness so he wouldn’t forget: he had *known* this before, but now understood it more clearly—Kronos wasn’t claiming to be better; he was simply admitting that he was much the same.

Luke *had* to remember this.

The distant sound of children playing caught his attention, their laughter and shouts carried on the breeze.

Watching them run around, a rare moment of peace amid the chaos of his current circumstances, Luke couldn’t help but smile slightly. The sight was like medicine to him, a brief respite that warmed his heart and lightened the weight on his shoulders.

He promised to himself he would do everything he could to protect them, stuck as they were between two forces that didn’t have their best interests in mind.

Even so, despite their shortcomings as parents and Luke's frustration with their handling of things, he could say the gods were, at least, a known factor—unlike Kronos.

After all, the Olympians were the deities the campers knew best, having the most information and direct contact with them. Their antics followed a somewhat predictable pattern, especially once one understood that gods—particularly the born immortals—tended to act according to their nature and domains.

This made it easier to anticipate their moods, though not always, as Luke begrudgingly acknowledged when thoughts of his own father crossed his mind.

Hermes' mind remained a mystery to him, as always, though he had to admit that his father could be somewhat reasoned with—

With a sudden realization, Luke found himself sketching out the bare bones of a plan in his mind—just an outline for now, nothing concrete, but a starting point that could potentially work.

At that moment, like an unwelcome, persistent guest, the aura within him began to pulse again. This time, it was somewhat gentle, trying to replicate the soothing quality of Mr. D’s aura, but it came across as more mechanical and clumsy.

The energy was nothing like his uncle’s, and its nature was too different—especially since Mercury, the source of this little parasite, was a god of commerce rather than one associated with mental health or anything that could help with Luke's anxiety.

If anything, it only succeeded in worsening his discomfort.

For five years, he had lived with this thing inside him, pulsing and making a nuisance of itself.

Back then, he could brush aside the unsettling sensation of something foreign that felt almost alive within him, mostly because he was too concerned with figuring out what it actually was.

In a way, it had been like a puzzle—something to explore and study to piece together who the god that had placed it inside him was, and, if he was lucky, to uncover how the deities actually worked.

*A curiosity.*

But now, Luke felt a deep unease settling in, a visceral sense of wrongness swelling inside him, especially now that the mystery had been solved and he knew who the god really was.

The aura felt more like an intruder than ever, and the implications of its presence only intensified his agitation.

Maybe he felt this way because it served as a physical reminder that his boundaries were constantly disrespected by creatures far stronger than he was—be it Kronos, Mercury, or even his own father.

All three had bound him in one way or another.

Suddenly, a wave of anger surged through him at that thought.

Deep down, he felt a primal urge to tear this foreign energy away from him grow, the desire so intense that it nearly stopped him in his tracks.

The urge to act was strong, fueled by his fury, even though he knew it would be, at best, stupid.

He didn't know if it would be painful—the memory of that day with Hermes flashing in his mind—or if it would alert Mercury somehow, but the desire to do so was there.

Almost as if responding to his thoughts—or perhaps sensing the shift in his emotions—the aura grew more agitated, stubbornly burrowing deeper within him, forcefully latching onto *something* as if to declare that it wasn't going anywhere.

Luke sensed that this *something* was his own energy.

That realization filled him with even more anger, so intense that he could almost feel it simmering in his blood.

It made him remember Mercury had *taken* it from him and then tried to pass it off as a fair deal, giving his own aura in return—something Luke never wanted in the first place.

"Gods and their deals," Luke scoffed to himself as he marched away, kicking the ground with each step.

The whole patronage situation flashed through his mind—how his father had brushed off the details of the second favor during their negotiation for the head counselor position, leaving as soon as he could. It had given him leverage over Luke since, at the time, they hadn't settled that favor yet.

It had been a jerk move, but what else was Hermes if not a trickster?

For all that it made him mad, Luke could grudgingly recognize that it was in his father's nature to deceive, just as it was in Mercury's to secure the best deal for himself.

In a way, it was almost a relief that they continued to behave this way; it made them somewhat predictable—though Luke wasn't entirely sure that was the right word.

It might be more accurate to say they followed certain patterns based on their domains, since he could always rely on their trickster nature—especially his father's, as he had come to realize—to guide their actions.

Even so, the mere idea of having to talk to Hermes again about this whole Camp situation made Luke want to scream in frustration and tear his hair out.

But it was necessary. He knew that, and he would do it—if only for the sake of the children and to maintain the peace of the only sanctuary their kind had.

With a scowl, Luke kept walking, not really paying attention to where he was headed or what was going on around him. He was too caught up in his thoughts, cycling between Kronos, Mercury, and Hermes, to care.

Suddenly, a deep bark echoed from somewhere nearby.

Turning to look, he had barely half a second to throw himself to the side and dodge a gigantic black furball barreling straight toward him. Unprompted, relief washed over him at his narrow escape; he knew it would have sent him flying if he hadn't managed to avoid it.

However, he knew this furball well enough to be sure he'd never hurt him intentionally.

Luke snorted, hands on his hips, as he watched the hellhound manage to stop just in time before crashing into a tree. The dog turned back to him, no longer racing like a crazed, hyperactive animal.

Pipo was now practically fully grown, just as fluffy as ever and roughly the size of a car—or maybe even a small truck if Luke was feeling generous. He wasn't sure if his dog would grow any larger, but he certainly hoped not.

At this size, he was already more than enough to handle.

Yet, despite his size, Pipo still behaved like a puppy, prancing around him, nudging him with his snout, wagging his tail with his tongue hanging out, and looking adorably goofy.

It made Luke smile a little, his negative feelings temporarily pushed aside as he focused on his dog.

“Who’s a good boy?” Luke asked playfully, scratching under the hellhound’s neck.

With his tongue lolling out and his eyes half-closed in bliss, Pipo thumped his back leg against the ground, causing Luke to momentarily lose his balance before he managed to regain his footing.

“Hold on, boy, you’re not a puppy anymore,” Luke said with a chuckle, shaking his head as he ruffled Pipo's fur.

He gave Pipo a few more scratches, resting his forehead against the hellhound's neck for a moment, savoring the softness of his fur and the warmth radiating from him.

When he finally stepped back, Pipo let out a disappointed whine, his big ruby eyes fixed on Luke, pleading for more attention.

Luke crossed his arms and raised an eyebrow.

When it became obvious that Pipo’s cute act wasn’t going to win him over, the hellhound straightened up and poked him with his nose—too big now to nip at his clothes without risking a disaster. Then, with a burst of energy, Pipo darted off in one direction, only to return moments later, rear in the air and tail wagging, before taking off again.

It was obvious his dog wanted him to follow.

Snorting slightly at the hellhound's antics, Luke took off after him.

He was led to the forest, the only place where Pipo could wander somewhat freely. Now that he was too big for the cabins, the hellhound still stubbornly sneaked around, particularly when it came to his little guarding duties at Cabin Eleven.

Not that Pipo's sneaking around was actually sneaky; it was hard to hide the fact that a gigantic dog was slinking about.

Even worse, there were times when the dog completely forgot how big he was, which could be a real problem around the kids.

Thankfully, it hadn’t caused any incidents yet. Luke always kept a close eye on Pipo when he was near his little brats; he knew better than to let things spiral out of control.

Due to that, the forest turned into Pipo's playground, a place where he could roam freely, chase monsters, and annoy the satyrs and nymphs that called it home.

They already held a grudge against him, seeing him as a creature of the Underworld—essentially the antithesis of their existence as nature spirits.

One satyr even complained to him that Pipo had allegedly peed on his wife’s tree or something—she was a dryad, so it had been taken as a personal affront.

Personally, Luke didn’t think it was all that outrageous; after all, a tree was a tree, and other animals did that all the time. Still, he felt it necessary to discipline his dog and teach him

which trees were off-limits for marking.

It had been a frustrating ordeal, but Pipo had learned.

In any case, Luke continued to follow his dog, realizing he needed a moment to distract himself and unwind before he snapped at the kids or had a mental breakdown.

And, well, this felt like the perfect opportunity for that.

Soon, they reached the spot Pipo favored.

The clearing was spacious, with an open center surrounded by tall trees, some younger than others. Luke knew this area was home to nymphs, with many of the trees belonging to the dryads.

It was really odd how much Pipo loved this place, especially since the nymphs barely tolerated him—made worse after that whole peeing incident—but here they were.

But he figured they wouldn't be a problem, especially since they usually kept their distance from Luke.

Sighing as he watched the dog sit in the middle of the clearing, tilting his head with those big, pleading eyes, Luke resigned himself to his fate.

He glanced around for a stick—something big enough to stand a chance against Pipo. Eventually, he found one that would do the job. It wasn't perfect, but he wasn't about to start tossing tree trunks, so the hellhound would have to make do with this somewhat small stick.

Before long, he was playing fetch, tossing the stick and grinning as Pipo dashed after it, tail wagging furiously. Occasionally, they wrestled for it, Luke holding on a little longer than Pipo wanted, enjoying the playful tug-of-war.

Other times, he'd fake a throw, enjoying the sight of Pipo tilting his head in confusion before turning back with wide, bewildered eyes.

It was impossible not to laugh at how adorable he was.

The tension in his muscles slowly loosened, and for a while, he felt lighter. His mind emptied of worries, focusing only on the simple joy of playing with his dog.

Then he noticed it—the faint sound of whispering around him.

Tossing the stick again, Luke kept one eye on the surroundings while watching Pipo dash off to retrieve it, waiting for him to return.

Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed shadows flitting between the trees, shimmering shapes with heads popping out to stare at him for a brief moment before disappearing the second he turned to look.

Narrowing his eyes, Luke wondered what was up with the nymphs.

They were acting way too strange.

Normally, they didn't even dare to step out of their trees, much less let him catch them sneaking glances. He was pretty sure they spied on him when he wasn't looking—the younger ones were particularly bad at hiding it—but they usually kept to themselves when he was around.

If he was being honest, it kind of made him feel bad.

He was just a mortal guy trying to survive, while his father was a god—there was no comparison.

Most importantly, Luke had *morals*.

Unfortunately, that had never seemed to matter to them before, which made their behavior now all the more odd.

After a moment's thought, Luke decided to ignore it. Whatever the nymphs were whispering about was their business, not his, and he didn't want to scare them away.

This was the first time in years—since he had been barely a teenager, if he remembered correctly—that they were acting somewhat normal around him, and he was determined not to mess it up.

Before long, Pipo came bounding back, the stick pinched delicately in his massive mouth. It was amusing how the hellhound managed not to break it, given his size. Luke smiled, shaking his head as he playfully tugged the stick free.

After giving Pipo a quick pat on the neck, he threw it again.

He watched as his dog raced off, this time farther away since Luke had thrown the stick even further.

While he waited, Luke's mind began to wander, finally free from any pressing thoughts. He felt relaxed, more at ease than he had in a long time—until the moment was shattered.

A faint whisper reached his ears: something about earrings and gods.

Abruptly, Luke froze, standing still as the words sank in.

More and more mentions of the same thing drifted into his ears, confirming what he desperately hoped wasn't true.

No, they couldn't know... could they? He didn't want to believe it.

A chill ran through him, ice settling in his veins and a heavy knot forming in his gut.

Unable to help himself, Luke spun around, sharply turning to face the trees. He caught only fleeting glimpses—a flash of bark-like skin, a hint of green in their skin and hair—before the nymphs slipped back into the safety of their trees.

The whispers stopped, but the cold fear coursing through his veins didn't. He stood there, frozen in place, wide-eyed, his breath coming quicker and quicker.

*How did they know? Did everyone know?* His mind spiraled, fear clenching tighter. *Had it reached Mr. D's ears too?*

His mind immediately jumped to the earrings he had hidden.

Luke had found a secluded spot in the forest, somewhere people rarely went to, and dug a hole deep in the ground. He had wrapped the jewelry box in layers of a plastic sack to make it look cheap and to protect it from getting dirty, then buried it and covered the hole with dirt. Then, he'd done his best to erase any signs of digging, placing plants and debris over the spot.

However, he wasn't a child of Demeter—he couldn't make plants grow to hide the evidence more convincingly.

But, even so, he'd done what he could, and until now, it had worked.

Or so he thought.

Suppressing the overwhelming urge to run and check on the hiding spot, Luke forced himself to think rationally, trying not to buckle under the crushing weight of his own fear.

But before he could pull himself together, a stern voice rang out across the clearing.

"What are you fools doing? Go make yourselves useful."

Instructor Holly, the old dryad who oversaw the racing lessons—and Dean's mother—had appeared. She looked almost exactly as she had all those years ago, back when he was just a boy, new to all of this demigod business but already carrying more knowledge than he should have.

Her skin, the color of aged bark, had a few wrinkles around her sharp eyes, and her hair was the same vivid green as fresh leaves. Despite the time that had passed, Instructor Holly hadn't aged a day. That stern, no-nonsense expression she wore was as unchanging as ever, pinning him with the same seriousness that had once made him fidget as a kid.

As soon as Instructor Holly gave the order, the nymphs materialized from their trees, dozens of them, wearing expressions that were both displeased and chastened. They shuffled away, though a few threw glances in his direction.

Their looks seemed almost sympathetic—pitying, even—like they were seeing him in a new light, murmuring amongst themselves as they moved away.

"And stop whispering about things you don't even know to be true!" Holly snapped after them, making the nymphs quicken their pace, though it didn't seem to cease their hushed conversations.

Luke's nerves were still on edge. He twisted the ends of his shirt in his hands, an old habit that made him feel like a child again, but he couldn't help it.

His eyes flicked to the old nymph, unease gnawing at him.

Did she know too?

Instructor Holly stared after the departing dryads for a few more seconds, her sigh deep and heavy. In that moment, she seemed older, like decades had suddenly caught up with her.

When she finally turned to face him, her expression was serious, but her eyes were gentle. "Don't listen to their foolishness, okay?"

"But…" Luke began, his eyes darting around nervously. "What… what were they talking about?"

Holly's gaze was steady, her brows knitting as she weighed her words.

"Nymphs like to talk," she finally replied.

And with that, the realization hit him.

He recalled the gray-skinned nymphs from that day, standing as still as stone in Mercury's presence. They had watched him closely, their eyes wide with shock the moment he dared to backtalk the god.

It all clicked into place now.

His heart pounded in his chest, thundering uncontrollably. He could feel sweat trickling down his neck, his skin growing cold as his stomach clenched painfully, a knot tightening inside him.

*No, no, this couldn't be happening.*

Desperation clouded his thoughts, blinding him as he stumbled back, his breath coming in short, rapid bursts that made his chest ache.

Suddenly, a firm hand gripped his shoulder. Instructor Holly's touch was steady, grounding him in the moment. Her voice, soft and soothing as if she were calming a frightened animal, broke through his panic. "Calm down. These are just rumors the children like to amuse themselves with, and they're only prevalent among the nymphs—not all of them, either."

Luke inhaled deeply, forcing his breath to slow, trying to pull in air without choking on his fear. His wide eyes locked on her, searching her face for reassurance. "Are you sure?"

"I am," she affirmed with a nod, releasing his shoulder once she was sure he'd regained some control. "But… judging by your reaction, I can see there's some truth to it."

Luke couldn't stop himself from looking away, pressing his lips tightly together to keep them from trembling.

This was bad.

Those damn nymphs had been gossiping, spilling information they shouldn't, and now others were learning about that fucking Roman god forcing interactions on him, especially when he wasn't even supposed to know about him.

He was supposed to have forgotten about it all—not even remembering that there was more than just the Greek deities and Camp Half-Blood, *certainly* not that the Romans existed.

*Were the Camp's nymphs aware of the Roman gods?* Luke wondered with a frown.

How could that be? If the nature spirits knew, the word would have gotten out eventually—especially since the satyrs were the ones hunting for demigods.

Besides, the Camp's nymphs were stuck here, near their trees, lakes, or whatever place held their essence, so they couldn't wander off to find out about those things; they relied on others to relay the news to them.

So how did they get that information if the satyrs didn't know? Wind nymphs?

Maybe the answer was simply that they didn't know the specifics, and he was just panicking because he had no idea what had actually been said about it or how it had gotten out.

He realized, with some bitterness, that he was using these questions as a distraction—a way to run away from his fears.

Luke focused on the dryad, glancing at her through his lashes, and her sympathetic sigh cut through his anxiety.

"Young one, this isn't the end of the world. They only know that a god has taken interest in a demigod—rumored to be you—and given them something, though it might be exaggerated. There's talk of jewelry, but the girls don't believe it, since you've only worn your usual earrings. It's just harmless gossip to keep them entertained, especially since you've been here so long without showing interest in anyone. They think your only chance is with someone from outside. Don't worry, it'll be forgotten soon enough."

A wave of relief washed over him at her words. They had no idea it was Mercury—no one had found his earrings.

He couldn't help but let out a deep sigh, the tension in his chest easing slightly.

But Holly's expression remained serious. "However, I can offer you some advice, just in case any of it is true: a god's attention is not something to take lightly. Trust me, we nymphs know."

"I know too," Luke replied weakly, his heart sinking again.

"You might have heard about it, and you might even think you know, but you don't really understand it—not like we do," she exhaled heavily, her eyes suddenly heavy with a weariness that seemed to haunt her.

Luke remained silent, unsure of how to respond. He felt too unsteady to say anything, but he didn't need to; she continued speaking.

"Gods… they aren't like us." Holly's gaze bore into his, unflinching. "They take what they want and believe it's an honor to do so. To them, a god's attention is the highest form of recognition."

As her words settled in, the aura shifted in response, making Mercury's voice echo in his mind and compelling him to agree with Instructor Holly.

"Unwanted interest is poison. Now that you're an adult, you understand that. The good news is that the gods eventually lose interest and move on to their next shiny toy. It always happens."

"How can you be so sure of that?" Luke asked, his voice sharper than he intended.

Holly simply smiled, though there was a hint of old hurt lingering at the corners of her lips.

Instantly, a wave of regret washed over him for how he had spoken to her, and he couldn't help but wonder who had hurt her to make her so aware of such things.

Before Luke could gather the courage to ask, Pipo reappeared, this time carrying something that wasn't his stick.

"You stupid dog! Put me down, then you'll see how it is, you mongrel!" Dean shouted, flailing his limbs in a futile attempt to free himself.

Pipo had a firm grip on the back of his shirt, completely unfazed by the satyr's protests.

Bounding up to Luke, Pipo looked somehow very self-satisfied—Luke didn't know how a dog could manage such an expression, or maybe he was just used to Pipo's antics.

Then the hellhound dropped Dean at Luke's feet and sat down, tilting its head as if expecting praise.

His friend stood up on shaky legs, huffing indignantly, his eyes blazing with fury as he turned back to the dog. He pointed a finger at Pipo's snout, oblivious to his mother's presence. "You flea-ridden mongrel, don't ever do this again, or you'll face my—"

Holly cleared her throat pointedly, raising an eyebrow.

Dean spun around abruptly, his mouth opening to unleash a venomous retort, but it snapped shut with a clack as he finally registered his mother standing there.

"Mom!" the satyr exclaimed, his voice jumping an octave as he gazed at her, wide-eyed, as if he might just turn back into a plant—since satyrs became plants when they died.

"Be nice to the dog, son. He's annoying, but he's a creature just like we are, and he deserves respect," she chided sternly, though she looked more amused than anything else.

“Ah,” Dean made a noise, then turned to stare at Pipo with a look in his eyes that promised revenge. But in the end, he relented. “I will, Mom.”

Holly raised an eyebrow, as if she couldn’t quite believe him. Then she glanced at both of them—Dean and Luke—before saying, “Well, I’ll let you two youngsters catch up. I have things to do and nymphs to discipline.”

With that, she turned and headed in the same direction the other nymphs had gone earlier, giving Pipo a hesitant, somewhat disgusted pat as he wagged his tail.

Soon, the clearing was left with just Luke, Dean, and Pipo.

“So, how did Pipo get you?” Luke asked, staring at his friend with a bewildered expression, momentarily forgetting his earlier conversation with Instructor Holly.

“This demon dog of yours caught me off guard,” Dean replied, irritation etched across his face. “I was sitting a little distance away, minding my own business, when suddenly a stick came flying through the air. I thought Pipo would chase after it, but no—he came after me instead! His eyes were downright malicious, like a demon’s.”

"Pipo is a nice dog," Luke protested, genuinely puzzled about the ongoing feud between his hellhound and Dean.

Sure, Pipo could be annoying at times—he might have even played the role of his father's spy for a bit—but he’d redeemed himself, so everything was fine.

At least that was how Luke saw it. It helped that Pipo was now working for him, though it wasn’t as useful these days since his father wasn’t around.

But that was just a detail.

"Nice," Dean repeated with a scornful snort, narrowing his eyes at the dog. "Very nice."

Pipo let his tongue loll out as he lay on the ground, staring up at Dean with a dopey expression. This only made the satyr look worse for doubting the innocent creature’s charm.

"Yes, nice of you to finally see that," Luke shot back, moving closer to Pipo and scratching behind his ears.

Rolling his eyes, Dean ignored the comment and asked, "Anyways, what did my mom talk to you about? She seemed a bit serious." He paused for a moment, then amended, "Well, more serious than she normally is."

"Ah, nothing much. She just came to give a talking-to to some nymphs, and I happened to be here," Luke said, redirecting his focus to Pipo and avoiding Dean's gaze.

Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed his friend squinting at him, but as always, the satyr opted not to press the matter and kept his thoughts to himself.

That was why he appreciated Dean—he was the kind of guy who understood how to respect boundaries.

Using the opportunity, Luke shifted the subject. “Anyways, how has life been treating you? Especially with all this craziness going on at Camp these days.”

Dean let out a deep sigh, looking exasperated. “It’s been difficult to do our jobs, that’s for sure.”

“What?” Luke exclaimed, turning to face him with a frown. “Why? As far as I know, this little riot thing isn’t enough to affect your guys’ jobs.”

Dean hesitated, his expression uncertain as he gathered his thoughts.

“Well,” he began slowly, “this whole mess started because someone let it slip, right? Now the gods want to know who did it. Since we satyrs were aware and the demigods weren’t, we’re the ones under scrutiny—even with Mr. D grumbling about how ridiculous it all is.” With a serious expression that mirrored his mother’s, he continued, “Most people think the tattletale is a demigod, especially after that whole hellhound incident the other day. Still, we’re kept on our toes, which is annoying but not the end of the world. It’s really just more bureaucracy and logistics than anything else.”

Luke remembered his uncle mentioning the suspicion, but he hadn’t thought much of it at the time.

To him, it felt strange to doubt the satyrs about something like this; their loyalty to Dionysus was unshakable, and they were almost fanatically devoted to finding their god, the Lord of the Wild, Pan.

If he were honest, their fixation bordered on unhealthy at times.

Still, it was a relief to know that the situation wasn’t that bad—just a minor inconvenience at worst.

“So,” Dean’s voice pulled him from his thoughts, “what were you doing before my mom found you, especially with this… adorable, oversized, and bothersome puppy here?”

“I was playing fetch with him,” Luke replied, then looked at his friend with a mischievous glint in his eye, an idea forming. “Now we have someone else to play fetch with, right, Pipo? What do you think?”

Pipo perked up, instantly rising to his feet, his gaze locked onto Dean with an intense expression as if he were ready to lift the satyr like a toy again.

“Ah, no, no!” Dean exclaimed, his eyes widening in realization. He shot Luke a betrayed look before bolting away, Pipo bounding after him playfully.

Luke laughed as he watched the scene, grateful for the lighthearted distraction from his inner demons.

He knew it was only a brief reprieve—soon enough, his problems would come back, weighing even heavier on his shoulders.

But for now, he could pretend, if only for a moment.

Chapter End Notes

Luke is having some thoughts and getting angry about them, which is completely understandable after everything he's been through. The man has endured a lot, but he's finally on the verge of exploding. Though maybe he won't, since Luke is very keen on projecting self-control when he is anything but fine. We'll see… In any case, he reflected on the nature of the gods and concluded that Kronos is just more of the same, though an unknown one. So, he decided it's better to stick with what he already knew because it's easier to navigate—gods bowing to their own nature and such. Or that's what he's trying to convince himself with. Also, he had an epiphany here—a plan that will be interesting and relevant in the future.

There's some bonding with Pipo and then the nymphs. Yes, the nymphs from Mercury's store opened their mouths, though they kept things vague. But honestly, this little interaction wouldn't stay secret forever, not when Mercury casually strolled in and paraded Luke in front of a pack of nymphs. Sure, they're his subordinates, but even they talk at some point. As a result, word got out that a demigod was a god's favorite, though not which one. The rest is speculation, but since Luke is the oldest and the one who regularly leaves Camp, the nymphs presume it's him. Besides, they'd find it interesting if it were him, for the reasons Holly listed. However, the identity of the god remains a mystery to them, and they don't exactly care either.

Dean getting bullied by the dog, lol. And then there's the scrutiny on the satyrs. The gods don't actually believe the satyrs are responsible, but they're keeping an eye on them just to be sure. So yeah, it's getting in the way of their jobs, especially for the Searchers and the Protectors.

Anyway, thanks for reading! Comments are always appreciated, and it doesn't matter if you're late to the party!

Do you guys think this will reach Mr. D's ears? And if it does, do you think he'll take it seriously or just brush it off as baseless gossip?

# Chapter 39: TLT - Family Matters

Chapter Summary

> Luke's paranoia flares as he scrutinizes every camper in his lesson, then he spots Chris with Clarisse and immediately butts in to investigate. Once that's done, he heads to the forest to finally talk to Hermes (with a bonus sketch of him at the end, lol).

Chapter Notes

> I finally had the time! (Thanks to a teacher canceling class and a holiday). This chapter was *so* easy to write—I finished it in just two days—so enjoy the early release as a little treat and our beloved loser dad. (The whole reason why I updated soon, lol).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Today, he was, once again, doing his job as the swordsmanship instructor, but it was much harder than usual to focus.

Honestly, everything felt like a struggle lately.

Wandering through the crowd of children, he found himself eyeing each one of his students as if they were responsible for all the chaos of the past few days, wondering which one of them might be the enemy agent.

As if he couldn't help himself, Luke kept watching their behavior—the way their shoulders tensed, how they shuffled on their feet, and how their eyes shifted when he was near. Each time, he compared it to how they had acted before this crisis took hold of Camp, doing so with an almost obsessive intensity, fueled by an old friend of his: paranoia.

It made him feel oddly like a sentry, searching for anything unusual that might indicate he had failed in his duties—any shift in behavior or signs that someone was acting suspiciously.

But it was hard to tell.

After news of the standoff between Poseidon and Zeus spread, followed by the ensuing commotion, every single camper began to act out of the ordinary.

In truth, it would have been stranger if they hadn't.

Even if he acknowledged the inevitability of it all, Luke still cursed the fact that it made his job even harder.

In a way, he *had* to be the one to figure who the thief was and protect these kids before any other disaster—of the many he knew were coming—could sink its claws into them.

Luke *knew* the future.

He pushed aside the voice that insisted he only knew *one* possible future, one that might no longer be on course because of his existence.

Besides, he was the oldest demigod still at Camp, with far more experience than the other campers—a gift of age, twice over—which made him feel a strong sense of responsibility for their safety.

As demigods, they only had each other.

Correcting a student's stance with a light tap on the arm, Luke smiled as the kid furrowed his brows in determination, doing his best to follow his instructions.

As he watched the boy glance at him now and then for reassurance that he was doing it right, Luke found it hard to believe these children might—*would*—one day be willing to kill those they once called friends, even family.

Kronos' voice rang in his ears.

Hastily, he shoved his fists into his pockets, hiding how tightly they were clenched, as he forced a smile at the child before continuing his rounds around the Arena.

Giving a sweeping glance over the gathered demigods, still haunted by the Titan's words, he felt a deep fear—not of them, but for them; for their loss of innocence, for the tragedy to come, and for the poison being planted in their minds.

Luke was an adult—he had lived a life before this, had read the books, and yet he *still* felt tempted.

What hope did he have for actual children?

Many had their own issues, and he could see it. While some remained strangely loyal to their godly parents, plenty harbored resentment. In his own cabin, it was impossible to miss—the desperation for approval and how it slowly twisted into bitterness when that recognition never came.

There was no hate stronger than what had once been love.

Shoving his thoughts aside, Luke focused on his job, moving along the line of demigods. He tapped limbs to correct stances and offered tips when needed. Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted Connor whispering something to a boy from Cabin Five. It might have looked innocent, but the glint in his little brother's eye and the way the Ares kid tightened his grip on the sword—muscles taut—told a different story.

With a sigh, Luke intervened before a fight could break out, sliding between them with an air of casual authority.

“Sherman, you need to loosen up. Tension leads to poor technique and slower reactions—both of which are bad news in a fight,” Luke said, his tone calm as he laid a hand on Connor’s shoulder to prevent him from slipping away.

The Ares boy wore a scowl, but he made an effort to follow Luke’s instructions.

Satisfied with the improvement, Luke kept his grip on Connor’s shoulder as he continued his rounds, dropping his little brother next to his other problem child with a warning to behave as he passed by.

Travis and Connor could keep each other entertained without causing trouble for the other campers.

Even with the tense atmosphere, the lesson was progressing as well as could be expected. By his old standards, it might not have felt acceptable, but given the current circumstances, the simple fact that Luke was able to maintain peace and stop fights from breaking out was a win in its own right.

These were strange times they were living in.

Scanning the crowd again—Luke *had* to be vigilant—he caught sight of his brother, and a sudden stab of distrust pierced him, quickly followed by guilt.

Chris stood close to Clarisse, engaged in a conversation that Luke couldn’t quite hear from his distance. Surprisingly, Clarisse didn’t seem too bothered; her usual scowl was present, but it lacked the promise of violence it often carried—something Luke knew all too well, having known her since she was little more than a brat.

Yet, despite the seemingly normal interaction, something felt off to him in a way he couldn’t explain.

Maybe he was being overly cautious—definitely a possibility given his paranoia—but he couldn’t help but keep his eyes on them.

His mind racing, Luke attempted to be discreet in his observations, keeping his body angled away from their direction while still catching sight of them in the periphery of his vision.

There was a very real possibility this was simply an innocent conversation.

However, he couldn’t shake the memory of the day Chris had woken up acting oddly, wearing a guilty and uncomfortable expression when Luke spoke to him, like… he had also been dreaming about Kronos.

The suspicion filled him with shame, but even the faintest possibility of it being true was something Luke couldn’t ignore. As the head counselor and an older brother, he had a duty to look after his campers and a responsibility for their well-being, even if it felt like a cold stab to his heart to think of his brother this way.

He had been the one to guide Chris when he first arrived, the one who taught him how to hold a bow and even how to shave… but what was he supposed to do, *to think*, that this same

brother—*his little brother*—might be involved in something that could inflict more pain and suffering on their fellow campers?

*What was he supposed to do?*

He couldn't let his campers be taken outside and used by a creature that viewed them as nothing more than a means to an end—because that was precisely how Kronos saw them.

Besides, for all their parents' assurances of care, it often felt like they too viewed the demigods as mere tools to be used. So how could Luke expect a powerful being—one with no real connection to them—to see them any differently?

Hell, that lack of connection could make it even worse.

Shaking his head to dispel those thoughts, Luke furrowed his brows and continued his rounds, making sure to keep the two of them in his line of sight.

As he instructed a camper on the proper way to hold a sword, Luke kept a close, watchful eye on Chris and Clarisse, studying them intently.

From what he could see, Clarisse seemed engaged in the conversation, even as she feigned disinterest. Her torso was angled toward Chris, arms crossed, though she avoided looking directly at him, instead focusing on the other demigods training nearby. Yet her lack of focus was betrayed by the way her eyes flickered to Chris every so often.

On the other hand, Chris was clearly invested, gesturing animatedly and smiling as he spoke. Occasionally, his demeanor turned serious, his expression shifting as if the topic had become heavier. In those moments, Clarisse furrowed her brows, seeming bothered by what he was saying, yet she still stayed there, listening.

*That was strange.*

*If* Chris was trying to plant ideas in her head, he had definitely chosen the wrong target.

Clarisse's loyalty to her father was something Luke rarely saw among the other campers and rivaled Annabeth's at times. Honestly, he suspected Ares held a certain fondness for her too, especially with that electric spear he'd gifted her.

In any case, that small reaction could mean a myriad of things, ranging from a simple conversational slip to an attempt at recruitment.

Still, his paranoia crept back in, whispering all the worst possible scenarios in his mind and stirring an itch beneath his skin—an incessant discomfort he couldn't quite scratch or ignore.

Prompted by the uneasy feeling in his gut, Luke navigated through the line of campers needing his help, keeping his eyes fixed on the two. He circled around slowly, inching closer and careful to stay discreet—he wasn't about to make a rookie mistake while eavesdropping.

However, just as he got within earshot, Chris turned and spotted him, his entire demeanor shifting the moment he realized Luke was there.

That was *odd*—and something he made a mental note to analyze later.

Luke offered a casual smile, playing dumb—a skill he'd perfected over the years—as he waved at Chris and kept moving forward.

Turning around now would only admit he had other intentions beyond his role as the instructor.

As he got closer, Clarisse noticed him too, but her reaction was different from Chris'. She merely frowned and rolled her eyes slightly, looking annoyed—a bit rude, but entirely in character for her.

"I see two brats skipping my lessons. What's going on?" Luke teased as he approached, ruffling Chris's hair playfully. His brother swatted his hand away with an awkward laugh, a reaction he mentally filed away.

"Uh, we were just discussing some things," Chris replied, rubbing the back of his neck and avoiding Luke's gaze.

Chris looked genuinely embarrassed, yet there was something off in the way he glanced at Luke, as if he were sizing him up just as much as Luke was doing to him.

*This is going to be harder than I expected,* Luke thought, smiling guilelessly even as a sharp jolt of annoyance surged through him.

No matter. Luke was still better at this game than Chris.

"We were in the middle of a conversation before you interrupted," Clarisse snapped, her irritation clear in her tone.

*And that's exactly what I want to know, girl.*

Luke hummed, tapping his leg with a finger as he glanced between them. Then, with a light tone, he asked, "Oh, really? And what could be so important that it made you two decide to chat right in the middle of training?"

Their reactions were interesting, *especially* because of how greatly they differed from one another.

Clarisse barely reacted, aside from shifting on her feet, like she knew she should be training—and that, in itself, was strange. She normally took it very seriously. Meanwhile, Chris's eyes widened briefly before he looked down, pretending to be ashamed.

It might have fooled someone else, but not Luke—not when this was exactly the kind of slip-up he'd been watching for.

Luke tilted his head, considering for a moment before switching gears. He raised his eyebrows playfully, glancing back and forth between them, then said with a teasing tone, "Ah, I see. Is this how the kids do things these days? What do you call it? Making a move?"

He pointed a finger at Chris, smirking as he asked, “So, Chris, are you making a move on Clarisse?”

“No!” Chris instantly blurted out, his face turning crimson. Clearing his throat, he tried again, this time sounding a bit steadier but still awkward. “We were just talking about how much better spears are than swords.” He glanced up at Luke and quickly added, “No offense.”

*So it wasn’t some recruitment scheme,* Luke thought, feeling a wave of relief.

But even so, Chris’s behavior felt off—very unlike him. He was being too… deliberate, too forward for someone so shy, which raised red flags in Luke’s mind.

“None taken,” Luke replied nonchalantly, waving a hand dismissively as he turned to gauge Clarisse. She narrowed her eyes at Chris, looking somewhat offended, which was… interesting. An idea struck him, and he casually remarked, keeping his gaze fixed on Chris, “But maybe you should chat with the lady here outside of our cabin activities as well.”

*Now, how will you answer?* he mused, a gentle smile on his face, but his eyes remained focused intently on his brother.

If Luke were the one trying to recruit someone, he wouldn’t go for the obvious approach of directly asking about their views—that would come off as too aggressive. Instead, he’d likely take his time, getting close to them and developing a rapport. After a few days, once they were somewhat acquainted and comfortable with each other, he’d introduce the topic more seriously—the real reason he’d been talking to them in the first place.

By that logic, and depending on how Chris responded, Luke would be able to determine whether this was just a teenage crush or something more worrying.

“That’s… that’s a good idea,” Chris replied, finally meeting Luke’s gaze for the first time in the conversation.

It might have been his paranoia playing tricks on him, but Luke detected a hint of relief in Chris’s expression, and the glance his brother shot him seemed contemplative…

*Suspicious.*

Humming, Luke regarded his brother neutrally for a moment before teasing, “Looks like your little flirting is off to a good start. Just remember, there’s a time and place for everything, alright? This is training, so I expect you to stay focused.”

Clarisse huffed, a faint flush creeping into her cheeks. “I take my training seriously, you know.”

“There’s a first time for everything,” Luke shot back, playfully flicking his finger against her forehead. “Now off you go; lessons are almost done.”

She rolled her eyes but didn’t react much more than that. Instead, she gave Chris a rough pat on the shoulder before walking away to grab a sword.

Turning back to his brother, Luke kept his smile but studied Chris just as intently as Chris was studying him. He tried to be discreet about it, but Luke could see the tension in his brother's expression as clear as day.

"So, Clarisse," Luke drawled.

"She's... she's nice."

"Nice," Luke scoffed, arching an eyebrow. "That's not exactly the first word that comes to mind when I think of her. I'd say fierce or strong-willed fit better. But hey, looks like your efforts are paying off—she actually listened to you without punching you for bothering her."

"You really think so?" Chris perked up at Luke's response.

Luke watched him, a lingering guilt gnawing at his conscience over his suspicions. Yet Chris's behavior—and especially that dream—left him feeling uneasy.

He had to tread carefully.

"I do," Luke replied casually, turning his gaze to the demigods around him, who were engrossed in their training, and crossing his arms. "But you really need to get back to your lessons. Clarisse takes her training seriously, and you don't want her to think poorly of you, do you?"

"No, I don't," Chris stated firmly, his behavior unusually serious, implying things Luke didn't want to think about but, even so, couldn't ignore.

The moment Chris turned away to return to his training, Luke's smile faded. He watched his brother's back, feeling his heart tighten as his mind raced with everything he had picked up from their conversation.

He *needed* to speak to his father.

That thought incessantly echoed in his mind throughout the lesson.

When it finally ended, he clapped his hands to signal to the other campers they were free and dashed out of the Arena.

Urgency nipped at his heels like a pack of hounds, pushing him to move faster through Camp. He glanced back occasionally, checking for any nosy brats tailing him, moving with the ease of a decade spent navigating these grounds, taking longer, winding paths until he slipped into the forest—the only place that offered any real privacy.

Once there, Luke slowed down, feeling a sense of safety under the canopy of the massive trees. Calmer now, he walked slowly, scanning the area for a spot that felt right.

Given his impulsive decision and the rush to get here after swordsmanship lessons, Luke wasn't prepared for a full ritual; he didn't have the bowls, offerings, or candles—which was far from ideal. All he had were himself and his prayers, and he hoped that would be enough.

Considering Mr. D had said that invoking his father's patronage could catch Hermes's attention and summon him, Luke thought it might actually work.

It *had* to.

Still, he didn't want to seem entirely disrespectful, not when he had to probe his father for some things. Hermes being annoyed would only make things more difficult.

*More difficult than it's already going to be,* Luke thought with a frown.

He pressed his lips together and continued his search. The least he could do was find somewhere suitable for this conversation—someplace symbolic, like a path or a transitional space, or ideally, somewhere that was both.

Maybe combining that with the right epithet… well, it couldn't hurt to try.

Even so, nerves crept in.

The thought of meeting his father again after years of silence—at least not in person—made his hands sweat and his chest tighten, especially when he recalled how the last meeting had gone…

*Crazed blue eyes glowing in the dark.*

Suppressing a shudder, Luke pushed that image from his mind, but the cold grip of fear still held him, his heart racing like a cornered rabbit. Another thought surfaced, paralyzing him with dread and making him seriously consider turning back.

*What if Hermes could feel Mercury's aura inside him?*

Unbidden, memories flooded back—the phantom feel of blades sinking in, cutting and tearing, as his father had forcibly ripped Mr. D's aura from his skin, igniting his nerves with pain. Worry furrowed his brow as he pressed a hand to his chest, feeling Mercury's energy stirring near his heart. If his father tried something like that again… it could very well kill him.

*It won't happen,* Luke reassured himself, feeling a bit of tension ease the longer he considered it.

For five years, this foreign energy had been inside him, and not once had Dionysus sensed it—not even during their exposure sessions to his aura. So, Luke had no reason to believe Hermes would be any different.

*But weren't they the same god in the books? How could Hermes not know?* Luke thought, worry gnawing at him with a vengeance as his frown deepened and he instinctively clenched and unclenched his shirt.

Another doubt nagged at him: Mercury clearly *disliked* being mistaken for Hermes, a fact Luke had already picked up on, and it lingered in his mind.

It brought back a thought he had years ago in that trailer, when Katherine first showed her interest in mythology and they first met the Romans.

Was this place following the simplified version from the books, or was reality different?

Shaking his head, he told himself it didn't matter—at least not right now.

The fact that his father hadn't acted at all was likely the clearest sign Luke needed to understand that Hermes wasn't aware of it—a realization that washed over him with such relief that he nearly toppled over.

Feeling somewhat more at ease, though still anxious, Luke redirected his attention to the task at hand, navigating through the forest in search of a place that might be symbolic enough to persuade his father to listen—and if he were lucky, to grant his request.

Soon, he found a suitable spot: a path that had naturally formed over years of demigods crossing this way, which felt like a good omen. It connected the safer, brighter parts of the forest with the darker, denser areas where monsters tended to lurk, the sunlight barely filtering through the thick canopy.

Since it was deep in the woods, the path was far from the cabins and other campers, providing much-needed privacy. It was also well outside the nature spirits' territory, so there were no nosy nymphs around to eavesdrop.

Not that they'd even consider it with Hermes around.

Taking a moment to steady himself, Luke surveyed the area and drew in a deep breath, forcing his heart to slow. He mentally reviewed the prayers he had memorized, then began.

"Hail Hermes Eriounes, the Ready-Helper, graceful god, friend to the people and guide. Hermes Charidotes, Giver of Joy, hear my words and aid me. I honor you and thank you," Luke recited, keeping his voice steady as he followed the formal invocation. He paused, drawing a deep breath to steady his nerves before whispering, "Dad, I need your help. We have to talk about the patronage. Please, come."

For a moment, there was only silence. Then a gust of wind rushed through the space, causing Luke to shut his eyes and raise an arm to shield his face.

When he opened his eyes once more, his father stood before him.

Hermes looked much as he always did—towering over Luke, even now that he was fully grown, which always made Luke feel small and cower in his presence. Lean and slender, his black curly hair framed a face that vaguely resembled Luke's, sharing similar features, though his father's were sharper and unnervingly perfect. This time, Hermes had chosen to wear a tailored suit, and his caduceus had reverted to its original form instead of the phone version Luke had seen before. His blue eyes, so much like his own, were devoid of their usual playful, mischievous glint, making him seem more… *other*.

“An interesting choice of location, son,” his father drawled, leisurely turning his head to survey the area. After a thoughtful hum, he turned back to Luke, his gaze sweeping over him from feet to head before tilting his head with a disquieting smile. “And my titles. Quite well chosen.”

Carefully, Luke studied Hermes.

His father’s words held a hint of praise, but he didn’t seem entirely pleased. For a moment, a strange mix of annoyance and reluctant approval flickered across his face before Hermes masked it with a carefully placed smile—maybe a good sign that Luke’s plan had actually worked.

There was a reason he had picked those epithets, after all.

After a moment’s hesitation, feeling slightly disconcerted but pushing through it, Luke clasped his hands behind his back and declared, keeping his tone neutral, “Father, I have need of your guidance.”

“Father,” Hermes repeated slowly, his gaze fixed on him.

In the blink of an eye, the god closed the distance between them with a single step, and Luke fought the urge to flinch. Firmly, Hermes’s hand clamped around the side of his neck, pressing just above his pulse.

Through the haze of his thoughts, Luke vaguely wondered if his father could feel the frantic pounding of his heart.

With a casual tone, Hermes studied him with those inhuman eyes and remarked, “It’s curious how you keep calling me ‘Father,’ especially when you had no trouble saying ‘Dad’ a moment ago.”

Tightening his grip on his own wrist, Luke fought to keep his expression neutral. “I’m sorry, Dad.”

Leisurely, his father remarked, adopting a cheerier tone, though his gaze remained sharp, as if trying to penetrate Luke’s thoughts. “See? That wasn’t so difficult, was it?”

Luke pursued his lips and stayed silent.

Still smiling, though his gaze revealed displeasure, Hermes tightened his grip for a moment, causing Luke to tense further before he finally released him.

Remaining close, his father asked in a deceptively amicable tone, “What did you want to discuss about the patronage?” As he looked down at Luke with cold eyes and a cordial smile, he added, as if casually reminding him, “I thought the arrangement was quite clear.”

Irritation flashed through Luke, but he shoved it down, burying it with all the other resentment he’d learned to swallow.

Blowing up now wouldn’t get him anywhere.

“I just had a question about how it works,” Luke said, glancing up at his father through his lashes.

With a hum, Hermes scrutinized him for a moment, then nonchalantly waved a hand as he began to circle around Luke. “What part didn’t you understand? I’d be happy to help clarify it for you.”

Luke’s mind raced as he kept his gaze fixed straight ahead, trying to ignore the goosebumps prickling his skin and the way his father walked in slow circles around him. Wetting his lips, he spoke deliberately. “You’re my patron, Dad, but you didn’t talk to me for five years.”

He blinked, and his father was in front of him again, a smug look plastered on his face.

Letting out a long, deliberate sigh, Hermes dragged a hand through Luke’s hair. “My son, I would’ve come sooner, but I’ve been dealing with some... nuisances.” His gaze turned colder, more distant, as if he wasn’t really seeing Luke anymore. “Very intrusive nuisances,” he muttered. Grabbing the side of Luke’s neck again, his father pressed hard, turning to meet his gaze with an unblinking stare. “You’re not going to leave Camp Half-Blood without a good reason anymore, are you? There are vultures out there—ravens ready to snatch up the first shiny thing they see. You saw it, didn’t you? Weren’t you scared? It’s safer here.”

*Mercury*. This was about Mercury.

“I won’t go out, except for the arrangement you made with my grandmother,” Luke managed to reply, his eyes wide and voice shaky as he fought to suppress a shiver, his heart racing in his chest.

His father scowled, eyes narrowing into slits for a moment, displeasure radiating from him in waves. Yet, his tone remained cordial. “Indeed, aside from those visits to your *grandmother*, of course.”

Ah, no. Not his grandma.

Scrambling to say something, Luke glanced down, feigning sheepishness as he said softly, “It’s just that—that family means a lot to me, Dad.”

Hermes paused, his gaze fixed on him with an unsettling glint in his eyes. Luke didn’t like it much, but it was better than the earlier irritation.

A slow, self-satisfied smirk spread across his father’s lips, as if Luke’s words had flattered him somehow, even though he hadn’t been talking about him at all.

But whatever. He could use his father’s delight in this little performance to his advantage.

Pressing on, Luke adopted a bashful tone that seemed to please his father for reasons he didn’t care to understand—he had no interest in Hermes’ weirdness. “But… Dad, as my patron, don’t you have some responsibilities toward me?”

Hermes paused, his gaze assessing Luke before a smile broke across his face. “Of course! I was doing my part; you just didn’t notice.” His tone shifted to one of contemplation, but his

gaze remained intense. “But since you feel I’ve been neglectful, I’ll make an effort to change that. Maybe we can have more contact from now on?”

*No, thank you,* Luke thought instantly, resentment bubbling in his chest. *You offer me this, but you neglect your other children, not even bothering to acknowledge their existence.*

“I actually have a request—two, actually, Dad. And that should be enough. No need to inconvenience a busy god like you,” he said instead, carefully choosing his words as nervous energy flickered beneath his skin.

“A request?” Hermes hummed, briefly narrowing his eyes before shifting back to a friendly demeanor. He projected a mix of curiosity and a willingness to help, though there was a hint of irritation underneath. “Let’s hear it then. I’ll do my best to fulfill my duties as your patron.”

*You better, Hermes Eriounes.*

“How do you claim your children, Dad?” Luke asked quietly, forcing himself to meet his father's gaze directly.

Hermes tilted his head, the motion unsettlingly bird-like, as he fixed his unblinking gaze on Luke. “I usually remember my partners, and my children as well. If a child exhibits my traits, I’ll claim them. It really is that simple.”

So, it all came down to chance—whether a demigod inherited something obvious enough for Hermes to notice or if his father truly had the presence of mind to remember they existed. That whole ‘usually remember’ comment didn’t exactly inspire confidence in Luke about his father’s capacity to do so.

Disappointing, but not unexpected.

*Fighting the battles of immortals who couldn’t care less about them*—Kronos’ voice whispered in his head. He hastily shoved it away.

“If someone else brought up the possibility of a child being yours,” Luke began, keeping his tone casual as he focused on the way his feet kicked against the ground, “would you even consider it?”

“Of course, I would,” Hermes replied, his tone serious, matching the gravity in his expression from the corner of Luke’s eye. For a moment, the god hesitated—something Luke rarely saw—before continuing, “Is that what you want? For me to claim someone?”

“Yes, there’s a boy in my cabin whom I’m pretty sure is my brother.” Luke cast a sidelong glance at Hermes. “His name is Chris Rodriguez, and he’s been in Cabin Eleven, unclaimed, for two years now.”

Narrowing his eyes in thought, his father sank the caduceus into the ground and leaned on it. The snakes—George and Martha, as Luke recalled from the books—twisted around each

other restlessly while Hermes muttered to himself, “Chris… Chris.” Then, perking up, he exclaimed, “Chris. I know which boy you’re talking about.”

“You’ll claim him?” Luke asked, unable to hide his eagerness.

His brother deserved it, and if Hermes claimed him, maybe—just maybe—Chris wouldn’t leave, wouldn’t become an enemy.

It was a foolish hope, he knew, but one he clung to nonetheless.

However, that wasn’t the only reason he was doing this—Chris deserved this recognition. As his older brother, Luke had tried many times, through prayers and other means, to urge his father to claim him, but Hermes hadn’t answered.

*Until now.*

For some reason, a hint of fondness flickered in his father's gaze, but he quickly countered with a pointed question of his own. “What makes you so sure he’s mine?”

Taken aback, Luke hesitated, his mind racing as he tried to formulate an answer. He had knowledge of Chris's godly parentage from his past life, but he certainly wouldn’t mention that.

After considering various traits, he finally said slowly, “He has…” Luke waved a hand vaguely toward his father’s face. “…your features. He’s also pretty good at picking locks and has a bit of a knack for being a jack of all trades.”

Leaning back to his full height, Hermes pondered the information, rubbing his chin as his gaze remained fixed on Luke. After a thoughtful pause, he sighed and lifted the caduceus from the ground. “It sounds like he could be one of mine, but he might belong to someone else, and I’d rather not step on any toes.” His expression darkened as he murmured, “Especially not now.”

*Not now?* Luke’s thoughts zeroed in on that, his mind racing with the implications. But before he could say anything, his father continued.

“I’ll keep an eye on him,” Hermes said, tapping the caduceus against Luke’s nose in a playful manner. Luke tensed slightly; after all, this thing was a weapon, and the myths… But his father just smiled fondly. “If he’s really mine, he’ll be claimed soon enough.”

That wasn’t what he wanted, but Hermes seemed unwilling to entertain anything beyond that, so Luke pushed aside his disappointment and anger.

“Thank you, Dad,” he managed, trying to smile, but it came off more like a grimace as his discomfort grew with his father leaning in closer.

With a sigh, Hermes lifted a hand to cradle Luke’s cheek, prompting him to shuffle on his feet and glance around the space to avoid those blue eyes, which looked so very pleased. “You’re such a good older brother, taking care of *my* children.”

Luke suppressed a shudder and stepped back, clearing his throat as he averted his gaze from his father.

“There’s one more request, Dad.”

“Yes, there is,” his father agreed, sounding somewhat disgruntled, yet he didn’t step closer. “What is it? Another child of mine? Or perhaps a gift? I have some items you might find useful, and it’s been a while since the last one. Besides, your birthday is coming up.”

“Ah, no, it’s simpler than that—just some information.” Luke nervously fidgeted with his fingers, keeping his hands tucked behind his back.

“Information?” Hermes echoed. The shift of his tone was obvious as he asked, “What kind of information, son?”

Luke cautiously glanced at his father, noting his neutral expression, which sent a fresh wave of nerves through him. Ignoring the feeling, he pressed on. “I was just wondering if there’s anything you can tell me that might help with the current… situation at Camp Half-Blood.”

Immediately, Hermes' expression hardened, his eyes narrowing as he scrutinized Luke. He sighed, running a hand through his dark curls, and his gaze flared with an intense blue light, glowing like supernovas even under the midday sun.

“It’ll be resolved soon enough, son. There’s no need to worry about it,” Hermes replied curtly, his tone dismissive, clearly indicating that he wanted Luke to drop the subject.

Irritation surged through Luke, pushing back against his fear—this wasn’t something he could ignore, not with the way it was affecting Camp.

Clenching his fists, he took a deep breath, striving to keep his voice neutral as he said, “Dad, we already received the information, and it’s causing problems among the campers.”

“It’s a disservice to us that this information got out,” Hermes shot back, his tone sharp but restrained. “Demigods weren’t supposed to know about the standoff in Olympus. If things had gone as planned, you wouldn’t have been aware of any of it.” His eyes dimmed a little, appearing more human as he controlled his voice. “We’re working on figuring out who leaked it, so don’t worry.”

“But that’s not the problem! The real problem is that Camp is on the brink of a civil war! Just a few days ago, almost all the cabins came to blows before Chiron had to step in!” Luke exclaimed, his brows furrowing.

The moment the words left his mouth, he froze, averting his gaze and gripping the ends of his shirt tightly.

*Crazed blue eyes glowing in the dark.*

Suddenly, Hermes’ fingers gently turned Luke’s head, forcing him to meet his father’s unreadable gaze. Slowly and deliberately, his aura seeped out, reaching for Luke in a telegraphed motion, surrounding him and settling lightly over his skin, almost featherlight.

Careful, even.

It wasn't the cold, sharp presence he was used to, nor did it have that familiar persuasive edge. This time, it was calming, almost peaceful, carrying with it a promise of safety—a silent assurance that it wouldn't harm him.

"We're handling it, so don't worry. It'll be resolved *soon*," his father reiterated, his tone firm as he locked eyes with Luke.

*How can he be so sure?*

Even with his doubts, Luke nodded hesitantly, but Hermes kept his gaze locked on him for a moment longer, his expression inscrutable.

The weight of his father's aura still pressed against Luke's skin when Hermes slightly furrowed his brows, prompting alarm bells to ring in his head.

*Did he feel it?*

Hastily, Luke grabbed his father's wrist, where Hermes still held his face. "But is there really nothing you can do to help me, Dad? No guidance?"

With his brows still furrowed, his father let go of Luke's face and tilted his head slightly. Thankfully, he didn't seem to have caught on. A proud smile crossed his face as he said, "What you're doing is already good enough—acting as a mediator. Maybe I can bless you to help with that?"

Perking up, Luke looked at his father's face. "Is that a patron god thing?"

Chuckling, Hermes repeated, his expression softening, "Yes, it's a patron god thing."

Snapping his fingers, a hint of his aura slipped out and settled firmly over Luke's skin, making him flinch and causing him to glow gray for a moment before evening out. The sensation lingered, though, and he braced himself for the pain to come, the memory of *that day* echoing in his mind. Inside, Mercury's aura stirred, briefly agitated, but after a tense pause, nothing more happened, allowing Luke to gradually relax.

Frowning, he rubbed his arms, trying to will away the goosebumps, and cast a sidelong glance at the god, who was studying him intently, his gaze sweeping over him as if searching for something.

When Hermes didn't find what he was looking for—or maybe he did; Luke couldn't be sure—he smirked and drawled, a mischievous tone creeping into his voice, "And," he winked, "it's because you're a son of Hermes—*my* son."

Awkwardly, Luke smiled in response.

He was glad to have gained something from this, even if it wasn't what he had aimed for. A blessing was a very good thing, after all.

Still, he figured he could push his luck a bit, especially since Hermes seemed more at ease now—almost playful, even.

“Dad, have you been very busy lately?” Luke asked casually, trying to keep his tone light, but it was clear his father wasn’t buying it.

Raising his brows with a hint of amusement, Hermes replied in a flippant tone, as if he were joining in a game—and maybe to his father, that’s all it was: a game. “Yes, I’ve had a lot of meetings these past few months.” Sighing, he directed one blue eye toward Luke. “Isn’t it the wish of many of us to avoid taking sides?”

Luke processed the information, recognizing it confirmed his suspicions but offered little else. He could sense there was more his father wasn't sharing.

“Is it? To all of them?”

Hermes regarded him thoughtfully, humming as if weighing his words. Then, with heavy implications, he answered vaguely, “The role of a diplomat is especially valuable in times like this, son.”

Furrowing his brows, Luke's eyes widened, but before he could respond, his father smiled and placed a finger over his own lips—the universal gesture for silence. Stepping back, he added, “Well, son, it was good to see you, but I have plenty more meetings today.”

Then, Hermes began to glow, causing Luke to shut his eyes. When he opened them again, he found himself alone.

Now, with only his thoughts as company, he let himself lean against a tree, thinking over what his father had revealed—or implied, to be more accurate—while piecing it together with what he knew from the books. If Hermes was struggling to persuade the gods to stay neutral, it probably meant the minor gods were already showing signs of rebellion.

*Had they really chosen sides this early? Did this happen in the books as well?* Luke mused, his forehead creasing with worry.

It was concerning, but there wasn’t much he could do.

It was all in Percy’s hands now.

Chapter End Notes

> 🐓 A little sketch of Hermes for those interested: https://ibb.co/zJ9kcJ1 🐓 Now, a full body one of him (without the hat, because I can’t draw it well, lol) : https://ibb.co/fXP368v 🐓

Everyone is acting strange, and that's triggering Luke's hindbrain to become paranoid, so he's constantly on the lookout and stressed as hell. Nothing has set off his paranoia more than seeing Chris talking to Clarisse, though he's been suspicious of everything Chris has been doing for days now. The conversation is a way to gauge Chris' intentions —whether it's just a crush or if there's something more, like a recruitment attempt or something else. Since Chris is shy, Luke is trying to figure things out based on that; if his brother is being too forward, it might have other motives. That's why the prodding comes off as teasing, especially because Chris is also acting strange toward Luke. It's kind of a mutual wariness.

Then we get into more Mercury aura stuff, with Luke having some very valid fears here, and wondering how Hermes could possibly not know about it. On another note, Luke is being crafty, trying to appease his father with both the location and the epithets, the latter being more relevant.

So, Hermes. He's busy—very, very busy. But the moment he heard 'patronage' and 'discuss' in the same sentence, he came immediately, lol. Yeah, he thought Luke was going to try to wiggle out of it. As for the rest, Hermes made a lot of leaps of logic in that strange mind of his. It was something like this: my son is taking care of my children >> my children are extensions of me >> my son cares about me. Which is… wrong. But it made him easier for Luke to influence, though 'manipulate' is too strong a word here —'more open to suggestions' might be better, lol. And no, he doesn't know about Luke giving away the whistle. Yet. And the caduceus comment is because, well, it was used to make people sleep, among other magic stuff. Once, in the myths, it was used to make a woman sleep, then Hermes violated her. Aside from all the power that thing has, of course.

In any case, thanks for reading! Comments are always appreciated! And it doesn't matter if you're late to the party!

Any guesses on why Hermes doesn't know about the aura?

# Chapter 40: TLT - De-escalation

Chapter Summary

> Luke trying to celebrate his birthday, even though it falls on the same day as the deadline… Then the trio returns victorious, and there's another round of celebration (and relief).

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

This was supposed to be a happy day, but the shadow of the deadline and the standoff between Zeus and Poseidon loomed large.

It was darkening everyone's mood, worry creeping in as they nervously glanced at the clear blue sky, half-expecting the apocalypse to start at any moment.

Not that Luke *really* believed civilization was on the brink of collapse. There were plenty of gods and creatures out there, and he wasn't convinced they'd let the Greeks bring an end to civilization.

After all, there were many other pantheons in the world.

But that's what he kept telling himself.

As Luke stared up at the sky like everyone else, he had to admit—deep down—he was just as nervous as they were. It was sad, really, especially since today was his birthday, his day, and he should've been focused on nothing but enjoying it with the people he cared about.

With that thought in mind, he made the decision to do just that.

Forcefully, he shifted his focus to the slice of cake in front of him, scooping up a piece and shoving it into his mouth. The rich chocolate melted on his tongue, the sweetness instantly lifting his spirits.

Feeling a bit lighter, he glanced around, smiling at his friends and family gathered together. Their laughter rang out, warm and real, even if it carried a hint of nervousness, but nothing that could spoil the moment. A wave of gratitude swelled in his chest—despite the looming deadline and the fear of war hanging over them, they still showed up, trying to make this day special for him.

They were all gathered on the Big House porch, where Mr. D had graciously allowed them to celebrate. It wasn't a full-blown party, just a small gathering with the people closest to him—

Mr. D, the twins, his brothers, Inês, Lee, Dean, and even Peter, who was still hanging around Camp for some reason. Not that Luke was complaining about it.

Sure, some hadn't come, like Clarisse, and Annabeth was, of course, absent, but he pushed those thoughts aside and concentrated on the people who were actually here.

As he chewed, Luke found himself wondering about his dog. Before coming to the gathering, he had searched the forest for Pipo, but he hadn't been there.

Maybe he was off messing with the monsters deeper in the woods?

It wasn't unusual for Pipo to entertain himself that way, often disappearing for days at a time. Luke smiled at the thought, picturing his dog chasing a pack of monsters in a wild goose chase, much like a barn cat. He figured that at least Pipo's antics were doing some form of pest control.

"Lucy," Mr. D drawled lazily, snapping Luke's attention back to him. His uncle lounged across the table, a suspicious glint sparkling in his eye as he swirled his Coke in one hand. With a casual, almost offhanded tone, as if discussing the weather, he remarked, "Just one more year, and you'll be able to drink alcohol, won't you?"

The mention of alcohol felt too suspicious coming from his uncle.

"Yeah..." Luke muttered in response, setting down his cutlery and squinting at his uncle with skepticism.

Humming to himself, Dionysus took a sip of his drink, his brows knitting together in displeasure. "You know, offerings don't exactly feed the gods, and it's been far too long—"

"Dad!" Pollux suddenly interjected, materializing beside Mr. D, with Castor on the other side, both sporting matching looks of disapproval. "You can't seriously be asking Luke for wine. What happened to your prohibition?"

Standing behind them was Dean, his serious expression and rigid posture making him look as if he had a metal pole for a spine. For all that he was playing the role of a private bodyguard, he was still a birthday guest, yet he was far too intimidated to refuse when Mr. D had ordered him to shadow his kids. It was a shame, really, but Dean always acted this way around Dionysus—or any authority figure, for that matter.

Uncle D waved his hand dismissively, rolling his eyes at his sons. "An offering isn't the same as me drinking wine, boys. It's not the same *at all*."

Still suspicious, Pollux furrowed his brows. "Then why are you trying to convince Luke to offer you some?"

"Ugh, aren't you a nuisance," Mr. D grumbled, shooting his son a withering look. With a theatrical sigh, Dionysus set down his Diet Coke with a dramatic flourish. "Don't you have better things to do than bother me? You two are ruining my peace."

“This is the father we have, Pollux…” Castor shook his head dramatically, casting a disappointed look at Mr. D.

“Yeah, kicking his sons out—what a great dad,” Pollux added, shaking his head in sync with his twin.

“Well, one of you can stay then,” Uncle D said casually, raising his brows as he pointed his Coke between them.

“He only wants one of us,” Pollux sighed heavily, turning to face his brother as if he hadn’t heard their father.

“He wants to separate twins,” Castor chimed in, crossing his arms dramatically.

“Sacrilege,” they both exclaimed in unison, spinning around and strutting away, noses in the air with feigned outrage.

Behind them, Dean followed, shooting exasperated looks at Luke, who just smiled and waved, causing the satyr to roll his eyes as subtly as he could.

“Wait!” Mr. D called after them, twisting in his chair, but they didn’t look back. “I said one of you had to leave, not both—” He slumped back into his seat with a muttered, “Brats.”

Despite his uncle’s dramatic act of being deeply wronged, Luke could see the fondness in his eyes as clear as day, softening his expression.

Eating another bite of cake to hold back his laughter, Luke finally managed to compose himself and said lightly, “They’re not wrong, Uncle. What about the prohibition?”

"That’s irrelevant in this case," Dionysus remarked, waving a hand dismissively. "If it’s an offering, no one can say anything. I’ve still got worshippers, you know. They all offer wine, and while it’s nice, it’s not the same as me drinking it." He glanced at his nails before adding with a casual flick, "But I *suppose* it does give me a little boost."

*A little boost?* Luke thought, a smirk creeping onto his face. *That’s a nice loophole you found there, Uncle.*

“I don’t even know if I’ll enjoy alcohol, Uncle,” he retorted, shaking his head with a hint of amusement. He gestured to the empty plate before him and added, “I think I’d rather have this.”

Mr. D huffed and leaned forward, tapping his fingers on the table. “You’ll change your tune once you taste wine for the first time.”

Luke hadn’t enjoyed alcohol in his past life, so he didn’t expect this one to be any different. Silently wishing his uncle good luck in changing his mind, he replied, “If you say so.”

Squinting at him, Mr. D shook his head and let out a heavy sigh before rising from his seat. “Anyway, happy birthday, Lucy. Congratulations on surviving this long and all that.” He cast

a disdainful glance at the demigods gathered around him. “I tire of this little party of brats. I’ll be taking a nap.”

With that, Mr. D turned and made his way toward the Big House. And—totally by accident, *of course*—he bumped into his sons, muttering something Luke couldn't quite catch. In the next moment, the three of them vanished into the building.

Propping his cheek on his hand, Luke's gaze drifted to his siblings huddled in a corner, fixated on Travis, who was wildly gesturing about something—definitely nothing good. Even Chris was there, prompting Luke to narrow his eyes at him, a mix of negative emotions flaring up briefly before he shook his head, pushing those thoughts aside.

With a deep breath, he stood up, reminding himself that today was a good day—and there was a time and place to dwell on things like this. Today wasn’t it.

As he took a moment to survey the porch, Luke spotted Inês sitting with Peter and Lee a few tables away—*the older demigods' club,* he mused with a hint of amusement. Inês gestured animatedly, as if revealing the secrets of the universe to Peter, who frowned in concentration while he listened. Meanwhile, Lee seemed less engaged, politely nodding along.

Luke made up his mind—he was surrounded by brats every hour of the day, even in his sleep, so this was his chance to be around people his own age—heading toward them.

As he drew closer, Inês noticed him and waved him over, patting the seat next to her. “Look who finally decided to grace us with his presence—the birthday boy!”

Rolling his eyes, but unable to suppress a smile, Luke complied.

“Well, how does it feel to be an old man?” she asked, clasping her hands together and raising her eyebrows in mock curiosity, though the teasing glint in her eyes was obvious.

“I wouldn’t know,” Luke replied, propping his hand on his cheek. He glanced at Peter and nodded in his direction. “You might have to ask the real old man over there; he’s older than I am.” With a dramatic sigh, he leaned back, tilting his head toward Inês. “Shocking, I know.”

Inês giggled, while Lee stifled his laughter behind his hand.

Meanwhile, Peter blinked, staring at Luke with an impassive expression. Then he said, “To be old is to collect wisdom; there’s no shame in it.”

*There he goes with his wise monk bullshit,* Luke thought, rubbing his chin with a finger and arching an eyebrow at the older man, who ignored him.

“That’s true,” Lee chimed in, a small smile on his face. “For us demigods, every year we survive is a win.” He raised his drink and announced, “So let’s toast to another year of life—oldest demigods at camp and still counting!”

Luke raised his eyebrows and followed the others' lead. However, instead of drinking his Coke like the rest—soft drinks always made his stomach feel funny, and he wasn’t a big fan—he hummed. With a teasing tone, he remarked, “I thought this was all about me, since it’s

my birthday and everything, but it seems like it's turned into a celebration for everyone else here…"

"And it is your day!" Inês retorted, her smile revealing that she sensed Luke wasn't truly bothered—he was, in fact, content. As if she couldn't help herself, she glanced up for a moment before hastily refocusing on him, her eyes a bit wide and her smile slightly stiff. Nevertheless, she added, "And it's a good day to be born, too. The summer solstice carries a lot of nice symbolism, like renewal and abundance, so…"

"We're celebrating you," Lee continued, his gentle expression tinged with a bit of stiffness, much like Inês. He didn't glance up at the sky like she did, but the flicker of his eyes hinted that he wanted to.

They were certainly making an effort, Luke noted as he held his Coke for a moment, then set it down with a sigh.

The thought of being born on the summer solstice—*rebirth and renewal*—flickered through his mind, but he dismissed it quickly. Instead, he broke the moment by joking, "And here I was feeling like chopped liver." He nodded toward his siblings, now circling around the cake before jumping in surprise at Chiron's sudden appearance. "Guess it's just an excuse to eat cake, too."

"Of course you're not, and we're definitely not just here for the cake," Lee chuckled, the tension easing from his shoulders. "Though, I'll admit, it's a pretty good incentive."

Inês made a disdainful sound in the back of her throat, shooting a glance toward the kids. "To them, it seems more like a goal than just an incentive." For a moment, she regarded them with indifference, but then a thought seemed to strike her. "I just realized," she said, her voice shifting to a pouty tone, "this is a total sausage fest."

Unable to contain himself, Luke let out a sharp laugh as he looked around and realized that Inês was right—there were mostly boys gathered.

"Clarisse didn't want to come; she said she had to fulfill her duties as head counselor," he explained, amusement still dancing in his smile.

But she had a solid point. Once again, he realized that his siblings were mostly boys—and he genuinely missed having sisters around. Maybe his father was just inept at having girls; who knew?

Peter crossed his arms and declared, completely unprompted, "She caused the problem, so she should fix it."

With a grimace followed by a sigh, Inês relented, "Oh well, that's not entirely untrue…" She placed a hand on her chest, straightened up, and proclaimed, "At least I'm here to brighten your day and restore some balance."

"Brightening the day sounds more like a Cabin Seven thing than a Cabin Ten one. Isn't yours more about love?" Lee remarked playfully.

Inês snapped her head toward Lee, her eyebrows arching so high they nearly brushed her hairline. She gave him an assessing once-over, and a familiar glint sparked in her brown eyes.

*Here comes shit,* Luke thought to himself, already feeling resigned.

“Well, well, well,” she drawled, shifting closer to Lee, who was looking more and more uncomfortable. He shot a glance at Luke, silently asking for help, but Luke just shrugged—he’d stirred the pot, so it was Lee’s turn to deal with the fallout. “Are you really saying love can’t brighten the day, sunny boy? Maybe experiencing it will make you even sunnier.” With a smirk, she leaned in and added, “Or perhaps that’s why you’re already so bright.”

Lee’s face flushed a deep crimson, his eyes widening as he stammered out a jumbled string of words that Luke could barely make sense of. “I-I don’t—”

“Don’t tease him, Inês,” Luke sighed, rolling his eyes as he pointed to his friend. “See? You’ve broken him.”

Huffing, she leaned back into her own space but kept her gaze fixed on Lee with keen interest. A flash of memory surfaced—of the previous Aphrodite head counselor and her pack of hyenas—and he shuddered at the unwelcome comparison.

“Ah, no, I wasn’t bothered!” Lee protested, but his frantic gestures gave him away. The flush on his face deepened, and he appeared even more flustered than before.

“If you say so…” Luke muttered, furrowing his brows as he snagged a piece of cake from Peter, who merely nodded to signal he wasn't interested—the older man never touched anything that wasn’t healthy.

*Whatever.* Luke was all about the sugary stuff, and if Peter didn’t want it, that was his problem, not Luke’s. Same with Lee—he claimed he wasn’t bothered, so Luke wasn’t going to push it.

In a flash, Inês shot to her feet and made a beeline for Lee, yanking him up with a vice-like grip on his arm as they engaged in a silent conversation—one filled with plenty of eyebrow wiggling, Luke noted. She turned to face everyone, her hand still gripping Lee's arm, and declared, “Lee and I have some things to discuss.”

Laughing awkwardly, Lee shot a glance at Luke and then at Peter, his eyes wide. “Yeah… we need to talk about some things…” he said, his voice betraying a lack of conviction.

It was clearly a lie—Lee wasn’t a good liar, not here and not on Mars.

Squinting at both of them, Luke took in the scene: Inês—who clearly had no shame—batted her eyelashes at him innocently, stifling a giggle behind her hand, while Lee grew increasingly awkward.

Was this some kind of teenage thing?

Well, it didn’t matter, so he simply shrugged and said, “Okay then, have a fine discussion, I guess.”

Soon, it was just him and Peter left.

The silence was comfortable, but Luke was curious about what his friend had been up to during his time away from Camp. They hadn't had many chances to talk lately, both of them busy trying to manage the pandemonium surrounding Camp.

"So, Peter, how's life been treating you?"

His friend shot him a look, considering the question before responding curtly, "Fine."

Luke took a deep breath—what had he expected from this caveman?

"I mean college and all that."

"I see," Peter mused, a look of confusion crossing his face, probably wondering why Luke hadn't just asked that from the start. This guy was ridiculous. Nonchalantly, he added, "It's going well—won some boxing competitions, keeping up with college, and dealing with monsters when they try to ambush me. Or going after them when I'm bored."

To go after monsters… really, Peter Wu was the only demigod Luke knew who would willingly hunt down monsters just because he was itching for a fight.

Besides, Luke wasn't buying Peter's claim of being ambushed—he knew better.

Wu was old, massive, and a son of Ares, not the easy target most demigods were. In fact, he was more of a predator in this situation, and his survival thus far only highlighted how dangerous he really was. Monsters usually went after younger, smaller demigods—much easier prey.

But Peter? They avoided him unless they were feeling particularly suicidal.

"And did you take down any interesting monsters?" Luke asked, reaching for a second piece of cake.

It was his birthday, after all—he might as well indulge while he could, especially with the uncertainty of whether the kids had managed to return the master bolt hanging over them.

He hoped they had, and felt fairly confident about it, but he still caught himself glancing up at the sky every now and then, or toward the Camp's barriers, searching for… something. Maybe a sign, though he wasn't entirely sure what he was looking for.

"No," Peter replied, looking disgruntled. "Just a pack of cyclopes stalking a school near where I live. Maybe there was a demigod there, I don't know—didn't bother to check. They were easy to kill, though, no challenge at all."

Snorting, Luke pointed his fork at the older demigod and corrected, "Easy for you. For the younger ones, they're a life-threatening danger."

Peter shrugged, his eyes wandering toward the distant cabins. After a brief pause, he abruptly asked, "Got any leads on who the spy might be?"

Luke paused mid-bite, chewing slowly as he glanced up to study Peter's face. The older demigod remained impassive, staring out at the cabins with a stern expression, revealing nothing about his thoughts.

Setting down his cutlery, Luke laced his fingers beneath his chin and replied, "No. I have a few suspicions, but it's hard to pin anyone down. Nobody's acting the way they should."

For personal reasons, Luke was reluctant to share his suspicions with Peter—especially since he was considering his own brother as a suspect. The guilt weighed heavily on him, conflicting with the sense of responsibility he felt for Chris.

He could be wrong. He *wished* he were wrong. But deep down, he couldn't hold out much hope for that.

"Clarisse made a mistake by provoking this," Peter stated, narrowing his eyes—the only sign of his disapproval. "A serious mistake, especially with the circumstances."

"She did," Luke agreed, but then added lightly, "And so did Malcolm. She's not the only one to blame."

Wu let out a sound that was half scoff, half sigh, settling back and crossing his arms over his chest as he fixed Luke with a piercing stare.

"At least the fights have calmed down, and Camp feels more stable these days. Besides, today is the deadline, and nothing has happened yet; since it's already afternoon, maybe nothing will happen, and the bolt has already been returned," Luke continued, ignoring the silence and keeping eye contact.

As much as it pained him to admit, his father's blessing had been quite useful. It made convincing the little brats to stop fighting and actually talk to each other much more effective. Maybe it was how it made him seem more approachable, or perhaps it cast a peaceful, disarming aura around him. It might have even improved his already decent oratory skills.

Whatever the reason, it was infuriating that they were finally listening to him now when they hadn't before.

Yet, the relief he felt outweighed his annoyance.

"She still has to make up for it; that's her duty as cabin leader," Peter countered, his expression serious.

"That's your prerogative as the previous head counselor."

Honestly, Luke had no say in how Cabin Five managed its affairs, nor did he particularly care. His own cabin was already a challenge, and he was more than happy to focus solely on that.

Peter nodded sharply, agreeing but saying nothing further. He sat there with his arms crossed, a stern expression on his face, like a grumpy old grandpa disapproving of the youngsters'

antics.

Exasperated, Luke shook his head and returned his gaze to the horizon, scanning the distant barriers again. This time, instead of the emptiness he had expected, he noticed two figures rapidly approaching through the hills, making their way directly toward him—the Big House's direction.

Gradually, he rose to his feet, almost unconsciously, and made his way to the porch railing. He rested his hands on it, tightening his grip as he leaned forward, his brows furrowed in concentration as he focused on the two figures.

As they drew closer, their features came into focus: one had blond hair pulled back in a ponytail and held a familiar blue cap in her hands, while the other had brown, curly hair, his goat half unmistakably visible for all to see.

*Annabeth and Grover,* Luke thought, relief washing over him. But that relief was fleeting as another thought pierced his mind, igniting his worry: *But where's Percy?*

Anxiety gripped him, his heart pounding in his ears like a war drum. Before he could think, he bolted off the porch, barely hearing the voices calling after him as he rushed toward the kids.

"Annie! Grover!" he called out as he closed the distance, wrapping them both in a fierce embrace. They returned the hug just as tightly, their bodies shaking slightly against him.

Releasing them, he pulled back slightly, unwilling to let go. His heart raced as he scanned them for injuries. A few scrapes and bruises marred their skin—nothing serious, at least.

Considering this was the first quest any camper had done in half a decade and one so dangerous at that, it felt like a reassuring sign.

But…

"Where's Percy?" he asked gently, hiding the stab of fear that twisted in his gut beneath a calm facade—the kids needed him to be strong.

"He—" Annabeth hesitated, drawing in a deep breath to steady herself, her gray eyes hardening like steel. "We need to talk about the quest first, Luke. It's complicated."

"It's about the King's stolen bolt; I know," Luke cut in, urgency lacing his tone as he pressed for answers. "Where's Percy? Did something happen to him?"

Annie blinked in surprise, her eyes widening for a moment before narrowing into a fierce stare that clearly said Luke had some explaining to do later. Grover, meanwhile, let out a startled bleat, his mouth hanging open in disbelief, his pupils shifting into goat-like slits as he stared at Luke.

Shaking her head to refocus, Annabeth explained, her face a blend of irritation and genuine worry, "He went to Olympus. We got the bolt back and were all set to go with him, but that Seaweed Brain thought he had to handle it by himself."

Luke took a deep breath, exhaling slowly as the tension in his shoulders eased with the realization that the boy was alive. Thank God he hadn't altered anything so drastically to change that. He looked up at the clear sky and remarked, "Well, it seems things are going well then—no storms in sight."

"Yeah, I guess so," Annie replied, uncertainty lacing her voice as she followed his gaze upward.

"Maybe—" Grover began, falling quiet as Annabeth and Luke focused on him. After a moment, he continued, his brows knit in determination. "Maybe nothing will happen to him…?"

Luke exchanged a glance with Annabeth, but she looked back at him the same way Grover did—*so young*. Suppressing his own unease, he offered a comforting smile, placing his hands on their shoulders as he said, "For now, we can only wait. If the bolt is being returned, there's no reason for war, which means no conflict between the King and the Flooder. That should mean Percy isn't important to them and should be safe since he wasn't the thief."

"But he's still a child of one of the Big Three," Annabeth added, her expression grim.

"Indeed," Luke sighed, rubbing his cheek with his hand. He *knew* Annabeth was thinking about the prophecy. "But Percy is a son of the Lord of the Sea. Hurting him *now* would be a terrible mistake. The message it would send… wouldn't be good." Trying to project as much confidence as possible, he added firmly, "I believe everything will turn out fine."

Inside, he wrestled with whether he was speaking the truth or just voicing what he wanted to believe.

The gods were often petty, and their thought processes were beyond him most of the time—especially when he thought of his father and Mercury. Still, he had reasons to believe Percy was okay. It wasn't just that his logic was sound; he had also read the books.

He knew he shouldn't rely on them too much—things had changed—but still…

It offered him reassurance in moments like these.

The kids searched his expression for a moment, and Luke fought to keep a calm, neutral demeanor, even as his own doubts gnawed at him. Gradually, though, their tension began to fade; he watched as the agitation in their bodies eased, shoulders slumping as exhaustion settled in, curling in on themselves like wilting flowers.

"Let's head back to the Big House," Luke suggested gently, resting a hand on both their backs as he guided them forward. With a lighter tone, he added, "And hey, there's cake waiting for us."

Grover's eyes lit up, and he gave Luke a friendly pat on the back, saying, "Oh, that's right! Happy birthday, Luke!" Annabeth joined in, wrapping him in a side hug and murmuring her own heartfelt wishes.

“Thanks,” Luke replied, draping his arms around their shoulders and pulling them into another hug as they walked. With a playful wink, he added, “But today isn’t just about me. We’re celebrating the first campers to go on a quest in half a decade—laurels, burning of the shrouds, the full package.”

“We’ll do it with Percy—”

Whatever Annabeth was about to say was abruptly interrupted by a howl echoing in the distance.

For a moment, they stood frozen in confusion, but then a panicked scream erupted from the Big House. The voice was unmistakably Inês’s. “Hellhound! Oh my gods, another hellhound! Someone do something!”

Instinctively turning back, Luke shoved the kids behind him and crouched low, reaching for his sword. He cursed under his breath when he realized there was no weapon at his hip; there was usually no need for one inside Camp.

But after the last invasion, he should have known better and been more prepared.

Even so, he positioned himself protectively in front of the children, scanning the open space ahead. He was determined to defend them, at least long enough to buy time for their escape or for help to arrive if necessary.

For a tense moment, nothing happened, but then a hellhound finally emerged in the distance. Narrowing his eyes, Luke felt a bead of sweat trickle down the back of his neck.

However, as the creature approached, his confusion started to outweigh his apprehension.

*The dog was familiar.*

Straightening up slowly, Luke watched as the massive hellhound bounded toward them from the distance, seemingly emerging from the shadows. It was a hellhound he recognized, and perched on its back was an equally familiar figure, clinging on for dear life.

It was Pipo—and Percy.

So *that’s* why his dog had disappeared.

“Well, I guess we didn’t have to worry after all,” Luke remarked, hands resting on his hips as the knot in his chest started to loosen at the sight.

As Pipo drew closer, Luke moved forward while Annabeth and Grover helped Percy down from the hellhound's back. He patted the weary dog on the neck and rested his forehead against it, murmuring just for Pipo, “Good boy, Pipo. Thank you for keeping them safe.” Pulling back, he smiled, gently stroking the dog’s snout as he added, “Now go rest; you’ve earned it.”

He watched as the dog slowly trudged toward the forest, his paws dragging in fatigue. Turning his attention to the trio, he couldn’t help but smile a bit at Annabeth and Grover

fussing over Percy. Though the boy wore an unmistakable look of exasperation, there was a flicker of relief in his eyes, and a small smile tugged at the corners of his mouth.

When their eyes finally locked, Percy shifted awkwardly on his feet. His striking green eyes glowed softly in the light, sending a twinge of unease through Luke, reminiscent of how his father's eyes had done the same. Finally, the kid broke the silence. “Thanks for the whistle.”

Shoving the feeling aside, Luke smiled and ruffled the kid’s hair. “Don’t mention it, kid.” He rested a hand on Percy’s shoulder and turned to the others. “Now, let’s celebrate our little heroes for coming back in one piece—and for stopping a war before it could even start.”

Ignoring their embarrassed protests, Luke led them back to the Big House, where all his friends were gathered.

Uncle D was there too, having stepped out of the Big House—likely drawn by the commotion. He cast a quick glance their way before snorting disdainfully. “Well, it seems the little brats didn’t manage to get themselves killed, so I suppose we have to honor their successful return.” Pollux coughed pointedly. “And the fact that they stopped a war from breaking out too, I guess.” With a dramatic flourish, Mr. D called out, “Chiron, go blow the trumpet! Warn the other brats we have a celebration to get to!”

Moments later, the sound of the trumpet echoed across camp, and the mood shifted entirely. Luke found himself swept up in the crowd celebrating the trio's return—their first successful mission in five years. The atmosphere buzzed with excitement, and he chuckled at how quickly attitudes changed.

Suddenly, everyone who had avoided Percy like the plague was all smiles and congratulations.

Hypocritical? Maybe. But he couldn't expect much from kids.

Before Luke knew it, the day blurred by, and soon they gathered at the Dining Pavilion. Every demigod cheered as a grand feast was laid out. Chiron, looking as proud as ever with a smile that reached the corners of his eyes, crowned each of the trio with laurels.

Luke couldn’t help but smile at the scene.

Annabeth was practically glowing, her cabin chanting her name with pride. Percy appeared overwhelmed, swept up in the whirlwind of celebration, while Grover’s nerves showed in the constant tapping of his hooves against the ground.

But as the excitement began to settle, the trio found themselves leading a procession of demigods from the Pavilion to the Amphitheater. Once they arrived, the atmosphere shifted again. Annabeth and Percy prepared to burn their shrouds under the watchful gaze of everyone gathered—a symbol of their survival, a reminder that their bodies wouldn’t be burned today.

*Or any day soon,* Luke reminded himself as he stood with his cabin around the bonfire.

Annabeth's shroud, crafted by her siblings, was stunning—made of gray silk and adorned with embroidered owls, mirroring the symbols of their mother. In contrast, Percy's shroud had been made by Luke himself. He remembered that in the books, it was the Ares cabin that had created it, intentionally crafting it to be as ugly and unappealing as they could out of spite for Percy.

But here, Luke had acted quickly, stepping up to offer his own hands for the task, and it had worked wonders. He felt a warm flush of pride as he admired Percy's shroud—a striking blue, crafted from silk that shimmered like liquid sapphire in the firelight, embroidered with various fish he had discovered while searching for inspiration.

Its beauty made it almost tragic to consider burning it.

And he wasn't the only one who thought so. Percy had looked up at him with bright eyes, his cheeks flushing as he stammered a thank you after Luke handed him the shroud. He had ran his fingers along the fabric, treating it like a cherished treasure.

Honestly, it had been quite endearing.

Now, as Luke watched the kid clutch the fabric, clearly hesitant to let it go, he felt a mix of amusement and affection. If Percy was so attached to it, maybe Luke would consider making another one; he was proud of his work too.

But alas, tradition was tradition.

A gentle nudge from Annabeth was all it took to prompt Percy to throw the shroud into the fire, and as soon as he did, cheers erupted from the crowd.

Soon, they were all mingling.

The Apollo cabin sang and shared snacks while a crowd of demigods from various cabins surrounded Annabeth and Percy. Nearby, a couple of satyrs gathered around Grover, admiring the new Searcher license he had just received from the Council of Cloven Elders. They praised him for being 'courageous to the point of indigestion,' and even Dean offered his congratulations, though the tightness in his eyes revealed how much the license bothered him.

But Luke knew Dean wasn't stupid enough to voice his true feelings here, especially not in front of a wave of satyrs who would have his hide if he suggested that Lord Pan was dead. He also understood that his friend didn't want to ruin Grover's day.

Shaking his head, Luke scanned the crowd, a smile spreading across his face as a sense of peace settled over him. After days of difficulty, he finally relaxed, relieved to see the demigods momentarily forgetting the recent fighting that had plagued them.

*Still,* he mused, catching sight of a crowd in the corner that was deliberately avoiding Percy, *not everyone is at ease.*

The Ares cabin lingered at the edge of the crowd, their resentment radiating in palpable waves after the recent… revelations. The fact that Percy had tricked their father to win didn't sit well with them; they perceived it as a sign of disrespect and humiliation. Even Peter looked conflicted, though he still acted as a reluctant barrier against his younger siblings, who were clearly itching for a fight despite the cheerful atmosphere.

But for now, there was no fighting, and that was good enough for Luke.

As he continued to observe, he caught sight of his brother in the crowd, surrounded by the familiar faces of Cabin Eleven—the Stoll brothers, Chiara, Ethan, and a few others—huddled around Percy. Laughter bubbled up as they engaged in lighthearted conversation. Percy, too, seemed relaxed, chatting with Chris in a way that felt more genuine than with anyone else nearby.

An ugly feeling stirred in Luke's chest, weighing heavily as he contemplated what to do in this kind of situation.

Days had passed, and his father still hadn't claimed Chris. Luke could attribute this to Hermes being busy, but the god had promised to keep an eye on him. Taking a deep breath, Luke reminded himself that they still had a whole month before summer ended—and before the traitor was revealed, plunging everything into chaos. There was still time for Hermes to analyze and claim Chris.

*He had to*; Luke had asked him to do this as a duty as his patron god.

Maybe that would be enough to keep Chris from leaving. Luke had to cling to that hope. But if it didn't work out… he would do whatever it took to protect the others, even if it meant hurting himself in the end.

Taking a deep breath, Luke shoved his hands into his pockets and settled onto one of the steps of the Amphitheater, finding comfort in simply observing the lively interactions around him.

Someone plopped down beside him, but Luke didn't bother to look over.

"Are you being antisocial?" Lee teased, though concern tinged his voice.

"No," Luke snorted, even though he knew that was exactly the case. "I'm just being an old man. It's different."

"Well, old man," Lee replied, "it's still your birthday, even if all those younglings are stealing the spotlight. So let's celebrate a little."

"I've celebrated plenty already. I'm perfectly fine sitting here," Luke said, shaking his head with amusement. He turned to Lee, offering a small smile, and noted with curiosity that Lee shuffled a bit in response.

Clearing his throat, Lee asked, "Then… do you mind sharing your space with a nosy little youngster, wise elder?"

Tilting his head, Luke studied Lee for a moment, sensing something was off but unable to pinpoint it. He shrugged and replied with a drawl, “Make yourself comfortable, whippersnapper.”

Lee’s grin was nearly blinding, but he couldn’t help stealing a glance at someone in the crowd. Luke followed his gaze and spotted Inês, who had her hand on her hip and was casually running her fingers through her dark hair, trying to feign nonchalance. With an exaggerated expression of surprise, she perked up as if she’d just noticed him for the first time. She waved enthusiastically, and Luke rolled his eyes as she blew him a teasing kiss before sauntering off to mingle with her cabin.

As he watched Inês walk away, a puzzled frown creased Luke's brow.

*What had that been about?*

Shaking his head, he leaned back and rested his arms on the step behind him. He listened with only half an ear as Lee chatted on about something or other, savoring a contentment he hadn’t felt in quite some time.

The future might be difficult, but for now, things felt peaceful.

Chapter End Notes

So, Luke turning 20 now—mostly due to timeline reasons, lol. His birthday was always meant to be around this date, and the Summer Solstice has some nice symbolism, too. Mr. D offered up his porch to celebrate his nephew’s birthday, and, well, there’s some Dionysian symbolism in that as well, with the themes of renewal, death, life, and rebirth. Also, the twins are just as theatrical as Mr. D, so they’re fun to watch together, lol. Luke, though, is exhausted—especially after everything that happened—and his friends are on edge. Well, except for Peter. Maybe he’s nervous too, but it’s hard to tell with him. Inês, meanwhile, is the captain of the Lee/Luke ship and even tried coaching Lee, but… Luke’s not interested, lol. Peter is just… Peter. Nothing more needs to be said.

Luke tried to comfort Annabeth and Grover, and while his words made a lot of sense, the gods don’t really need to operate on logic. Especially with Zeus being at the top of the hierarchy. Thankfully, Percy returned with Pipo in tow—he probably called him sometime around the Underworld trip, which definitely made things easier to navigate down there.

Then there’s the celebration. Luke made the shroud, and now he’s got a Percy-shaped shadow following him for the rest of his days, lol. As for the Ares situation, I see him as being manipulated (maybe even under a spell or something) because of that whole ‘gods don’t dream!’ line he blurted out when no one asked. Percy couldn’t go head-to-head with a god and win; not even in canon was it like that. He won because Ares didn’t take him seriously, and Percy was clever. Here, the challenge was ramped up, with the gods

being more… uncanny, so they had to rely on other methods, like tricking Ares. Plus, the fact that Ares was a little wacky (due to Kronos) helped too.

In any case, thanks for reading! Comments are always appreciated, and it doesn't matter if you're late to the party!

So, is Luke right to be suspicious of Chris?

# Chapter 41: TLT - Betrayal

Chapter Summary

The traitor is revealed—or is it *traitors*?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Summer had ended, or was almost ending, if Luke wanted to be precise about it.

Sitting with the rest of his cabin in the Dining Pavilion, sharing one last meal with the brats, Luke glanced at the crowd of demigods. They laughed and chatted, the atmosphere festive and cheerful. Some were excited to be going home at last, while others celebrated surviving another year. A few year-rounders clung to their friends, their faces painted with exaggerated masks of sadness that provoked laughter from the others.

Yet beneath those masks, Luke sensed a very real sadness—a feeling he recognized all too well. After a decade of watching his friends leave one by one while he remained, he had learned to live with it.

It felt oddly as if he were a housewife waiting for her husband to return, hoping for his arrival yet resigned to the reality that he wouldn't come back. The comparison was ridiculous, and the thought made him hide his smile behind a sip of his juice.

After taking a final sip of his drink, Luke set down the cup and let the screeches of his cabin fade into the background. Ignoring the chaos at his table with practiced ease, he turned his gaze to the other tables, where the head counselors were already picking up their plates. Seeing this, he rose to his feet, grabbing his own plate of food, which prompted his little brats to quiet down and follow his lead.

Soon, they were all tossing food into the fire, offering part of their meals to the gods. Luke joined in with a lack of enthusiasm, though nobody would have guessed it by the way he hurled a sizable piece of beef into the flames.

"Hermes," he whispered under his breath, his voice neutral despite his irritation. "Dad, what about your promise? It's the end of summer already."

As always, nothing happened—just like the other times he had asked the same question over the past few nights, day after day.

Suppressing his annoyance, Luke stepped back and forced a smile at the next demigod in line before returning to the front of his cabin. He cast a sweeping glance and noted that all the head counselors were already at their posts, standing in front of their cabins and circling the

bonfire—surprisingly organized. It was supposed to be like this all the time, but with kids, that was often a challenge. However, on this night, when the new beads would be given out, everyone made an effort to be as well-behaved as possible.

Unconsciously, Luke's hand drifted to his necklace, lightly brushing his fingers over the proof of his survival thus far. Soon, one more bead would be added to symbolize the ten years he had spent in this place. He wondered how many more would join it before he finally left, but he shook his head, pushing those thoughts aside as he turned his attention to the others around him.

Across from him, Lee stood at the head of Cabin Seven, hands neatly clasped in front of him, while Inês leaned against him, one hand on her hip, watching the last few stragglers with a bored expression. Annie and Clarisse stood side by side, their brand of friendliness slipping into backhanded territory—and even with that, it still contrasted with the barely suppressed hostility simmering between their cabins.

Luke subtly rolled his eyes at that.

These little hellions, both the brain spawn and the mini boars, were still itching for a fight, even though the whole civil war debate had already been settled. If he was being honest, it felt more like Malcolm and Clarisse going at it while the rest fed off the drama. Really, it was a shame Peter had left. Now that he was back home, Cabin Five had slipped into their *usual* ways, no longer having that two-meter-tall barrier to keep them in check and remind them that their antics would have consequences. And, of course, Cabin Six was just using the excuse to act.

It was annoying, but soon, with the majority of them heading home, things would finally calm down for good. If it didn't, well, maybe Mr. D would finally lose his patience.

Before long, the last demigod made their offering.

Almost on cue, all the cabin leaders stepped forward as Chiron approached, carrying a sack filled with hundreds of hand-painted beads.

*And what a thankless job it had been,* Luke thought, irritated as he recalled all those afternoons wasted painting dozens of beads—and having to do more than his share because everyone else had done such a piss-poor job of it.

As the head counselors gathered around the sack, Luke pushed aside his irritation and focused on the ceremony. They started calling the cabins one by one in reverse order. The twins went first, handing each other their beads with their usual theatrical flair. Then came Cabin Eleven, with his little brats in tow, who—for once—formed a line and behaved. Luke only took his bead after all his hellions had theirs, and so it went on.

The last demigod to receive a bead—and the Camp necklace, since this was his first summer—was Percy. The poor kid looked a little lost, his eyes darting between the counselors as if he didn't know who to approach. Feeling a twinge of sympathy, Luke waved him over, offering a reassuring smile as he handed him both items.

Almost immediately, Percy's eyes widened, and he tucked his chin down, trying to hide the flush creeping up his face. Luke could see it clearly, even with the flickering firelight concealing some of the kid's embarrassment from the other campers. It was kind of cute, but boys Percy's age were bothered by the silliest things. So, Luke tapped the kid on the shoulder and lightly gestured for him to straighten up.

"Come on, stand tall," he whispered, before picking one of the beads and lifting it for everyone to see.

This summer, the bead was as black as the void—or as close as Luke could get with the Camp's materials—but it worked just fine for what he had in mind. At its center, prominently displayed, was a turquoise trident, the symbol of Poseidon.

"The choice was unanimous," Luke declared loudly, winking at the boy. "This bead celebrates the first child of the Lord of the Sea at Camp in years, who bravely ventured into the Underworld and stopped a war before it could even begin."

In unison, all the campers erupted into cheers, clapping their hands and stomping their feet on the ground. That is, until Mr. D, observing from the sidelines with a bored expression, turned to them with a raised eyebrow, instantly bringing the noise down to a more tolerable level. Even the Ares cabin joined in, though their enthusiasm was noticeably subdued compared to the rest. Meanwhile, the Athena cabin pushed Annabeth forward to share in the glory, and Luke couldn't help but notice the pleased look on her face beneath her sheepish mask, which made him stifle an internal snort.

Unlike on other days when they would return to their seats for dinner as usual, the campers mingled with one another this time. Still, they were careful to avoid sitting at tables that weren't their own; nobody wanted to offend a god.

Luke found it a bit ridiculous to get upset over something so trivial, but he never claimed to understand how a deity's mind worked.

Even so, he enjoyed a privilege that the other demigods didn't have: he could sit at table twelve with the Dionysus twins and the nature spirits, simply because his uncle liked him enough to make that exception to the rules.

Faster than he would ever admit, Luke clutched his food and ducked away from his siblings, making his way to the Dionysus table. He spotted Dean furiously stabbing a pile of lettuce leaves with more aggression than he thought a goat could manage. A scowl twisted his friend's face as he glared at the other satyrs nearby, mumbling something under his breath before shoving the leaves into his mouth.

Ignoring Dean's attitude, Luke settled next to him as if he belonged there, setting his plate down with a satisfying thud. The sound made Dean flinch and whip his head around, but Luke paid him no mind. He took a deep breath, relishing the fact that he could finally sit without being squeezed in on all sides, if only for a moment.

"Little bird, escaping your can of sardines?" the satyr grumbled, poking at his food with a fervor that was hard to ignore.

“Yeah,” Luke confessed without a hint of shame, raising an eyebrow at his friend before glancing at the fork and then back at his face. “What did those poor vegetables ever do to you?”

Scrunching his face and knotting his bushy brows together, Dean blurted out, “Do you ever have that feeling when you tell someone not to do something, and they just stubbornly go ahead and do exactly what you warned them against?”

“Is this about Grover?”

Now that he was an official Searcher with the necessary permission, Grover had set off a few weeks ago to search for Lord Pan. This, evidently, had sparked quite a reaction, but not even Percy and Annabeth seemed as upset as Dean was.

Dean huffed, shoving the leaves into his mouth and chewing angrily instead of answering—which, in itself, was answer enough.

“It was only a matter of time, Dean,” Luke sighed, picking up his fork and starting to eat as well.

As he took his first bite, he couldn’t help but feel a twinge of regret over offering that juicy piece of meat to his father. Luke figured he deserved it more than that sibite baleado[1] he was, unfortunately, related to.

Grumbling under his breath, Dean glared at his plate. “It’s a suicide mission. My dad vanished too—came back somehow, though he’s quieter now, maybe a little crazier. But his uncle’s dead, yet he still wants to go on this pointless search.”

“For him, it’s not pointless,” Luke pointed out. “For many satyrs, this is a dream come true, and we know how much he wanted to be a Searcher.”

“Dreams,” Dean scoffed, gripping his cutlery tightly. “Those Cloven Elders just chase after dreams, waiting to be saved while getting fat instead of actually doing something about it.” He shot a disdainful glance at the other satyrs gathered around and muttered, “And those birdbrains go right along with it.”

Luke couldn’t claim to understand the nature spirits’ politics, but he couldn’t help but find the satyrs’ inaction in preserving the wild places *curious*, to say the least. It felt like a swarm of drones unable to function without a queen directing them, and in this case, that queen was Lord Pan—his immortal brother, who was, unfortunately, dying.

And the satyrs refused to believe their god was in any state but alive and well.

“I feel like I should be insulted by that ‘birdbrain’ comment, especially since you call me little bird all the time,” Luke said casually, slicing into the meat with slow, deliberate movements.

Rolling his eyes, Dean bumped his shoulder against Luke’s and shot back, “Cut the act; you know what I meant.”

“I do, and *I* think that if this whole chasing dreams thing bothers you so much, maybe you should do something about it.”

With a grimace, Dean’s indignant expression faltered as he nervously turned his attention to his salad. “That would mean going against the Elders.”

*The fear of authority rearing its head again,* Luke thought, stealing a glance at his friend while popping a piece of beef into his mouth.

It really was delicious, and he felt another twinge of regret for having offered it to Hermes.

“Look,” Luke said, pushing his plate away after finishing his meal. “Grover’s out there, and there’s nothing we can do about it. This is what he wanted, and we already warned him. If he chose to go ahead after our nagging, there’s not much else we can do.”

Sighing heavily, Dean’s shoulders slumped inward as he muttered in a low voice, “It’s just that… Searchers leave, thinking they see signs, getting their hopes up—then they go out again, and they never come back.”

“He’ll be fine,” Luke reassured firmly. He knew Grover would be just fine in the end—more than fine, actually.

Dean gave a doubtful look but eventually nodded, picking at his salad half-heartedly.

Luke hesitated, glancing at his friend, wondering if there was anything more he could say to lift his spirits. But judging by Dean’s slumped posture and the absent way he was pushing his food around, words probably wouldn’t make much of a difference. Instead, Luke sighed inwardly, shifting his focus to the rest of the Pavilion, where dinner was winding down.

Unlike most nights, they wouldn’t be heading to the Amphitheater for the usual singalong. Instead, everyone would be going straight to their cabins—probably to give campers more time to pack at the end of the summer.

Recognizing the cue, Luke rose to his feet and gave Dean’s shoulder a reassuring pat. “Just relax. Everything will turn out fine in the end.”

“I hope you’re right,” his friend muttered, waving him off without looking up.

Luke didn’t press further. He made his way back to his table, already bracing himself for the mayhem awaiting him there. As expected, wrangling his little brats into a halfway coherent line was a challenge, but he managed it before leading them back to Cabin Eleven. Once inside, the real work began—convincing those who weren’t year-rounders to pack or at least organize their things, while keeping the year-rounders from getting in the way.

It was exhausting, but by the time he finally collapsed onto his bed, Luke had managed to get everyone to fulfill their obligations—somewhat, if he was honest—with minimal fuss.

*A small victory,* he thought as he blinked tiredly, letting his eyes drift shut before he could even pull the sheets over himself.

Sooner than he would have liked, morning arrived, with sunlight slapping his face and forcing his eyes open. Luke sighed deeply, sitting up with bleary eyes, giving himself a moment for his soul to catch up with his body before getting to his feet and starting the thankless job of waking everyone up. The last day of summer was always a bit easier, though —most of the kids didn't want to risk getting on the bad side of the harpies, he supposed.

Then he stood and did his rounds inside the cabin, shaking shoulders or yanking sheets off the more stubborn brats. Before long, the campers, likely reminded of all the packing they had put off the night before—Luke couldn't help but feel a bit vindicated; he had *warned* them—were racing around the room, darting from corner to corner as they scrambled to tidy up both their things and the cabin.

Since Luke, unlike the little brats, had already taken care of his things days ago—he was practical, or maybe that was just his anxiety talking—he figured he'd let the kids deal with the consequences of their own actions and go do something else.

As he walked up to his bed, Luke grabbed his sword, but before he could leave, Chris suddenly materialized beside him like an annoying little ghost. Luke didn't flinch; he'd developed a sixth sense for when his brats—or anyone, really—were about to pester him.

"Hey, brother," Chris said, his tone too light, almost rehearsed. "Could you help me with something?"

Narrowing his eyes, Luke studied Chris, noting how stiff he was, his fingers tugging at his ears—a telltale sign of nerves. With a smile to mask his suspicion, he rested his sword on his shoulder and asked, "What do you need help with?"

"Ah, I was hoping you could help me with the bow. I'm not very good at it," Chris mumbled, avoiding eye contact.

"I see…" Luke hummed, a hint of fondness washing over him before his wariness returned, prompting him to raise an eyebrow. "Why didn't you come to me earlier? You know I would have helped you."

This little talk about needing help was, to say the least, suspicious.

"You were too busy with the new kid," Chris retorted, his tone sulky.

"And you know that if you asked, I would have helped you."

"I'm asking now, aren't I?" Chris shot back, his voice edged with frustration. He shuffled on his feet, looking down at them as he mumbled, "Sorry."

Luke studied his brother for a moment, weighing whether to go with him. He knew he should be keeping an eye on Percy to catch the thief, and the line from the prophecy echoed in his mind: *You shall be betrayed by one who calls you a friend.* It unsettled him, especially since he wasn't sure if Percy's prophecy in this reality was the same as the one in the books.

But Chris *needed* him.

Internally, Luke acknowledged he hadn't given his brother much attention this summer due to his stress over the Percy situation. With a sigh, he made his decision and placed his sword back in its spot, noticing how Chris followed the movement from the corner of his eye—a strange detail he tucked away for later.

"No need to be jealous," Luke teased, a smirk spreading across his face as he turned to his brother, his eyes sparkling with mischief. He passed by Chris, giving his shoulder a playful pat. "Let's go, big brother will show you the ropes."

Ignoring his brother's embarrassed protests insisting he wasn't jealous at all, Luke marched over to the Archery Range with Chris trailing beside him.

Once they arrived, Luke reached for the bows but halted at the sharp clangs echoing through the air—someone was striking something. He turned to see that the Combat Arena was occupied, but from this distance, he couldn't make out who it was, only that it was a camper in an orange shirt. That didn't narrow it down much, considering Camp was packed with kids wearing the same color. Just then, he noticed another figure moving toward the arena—someone with dark hair, but he couldn't tell who it was from afar.

"Luke, the lesson," Chris reminded him, his tone a bit *too* insistent.

With furrowed brows, Luke turned to face his brother, unable to control his expression as he narrowed his eyes and scrutinized him. Chris's shoulders stiffened, and he looked up at Luke with wide eyes, his breath quickening. But then Luke wrestled back control, forcing a smile as innocently as he could. Chris relaxed slightly, yet a wariness lingered in his demeanor, causing a pang of regret in Luke's chest—he didn't want his brother feeling this way around him.

He wasn't their father.

"Yes, the lesson," he mused, shaking off the unease. He handed a bow to Chris and stepped up to a target. "Let's start with your stance. Show me what you've got." He paused, glancing over his shoulder at Chris, who fidgeted with the bowstring. "Just keep in mind, I'm the swordsmanship instructor for a reason, not the archery one."

Snorting lightly, Chris stepped up and positioned his limbs into a stance, concentrating on the target. It wasn't too shabby, Luke noted; his brother was holding it well enough, but there were definitely some visible mistakes he could help with. Chris' feet were too close together, and his grip on the bowstring looked shaky. Luke was sure there were plenty more errors he hadn't even spotted. But *that* was more Lee's specialty than his.

Hand Luke a sword, and he could easily list out a variety of stances and moves, demonstrating the best way to execute each one. Give him a bow, though, and he'd flounder around with it until someone came to his rescue.

"Wait," he said, cutting in just before Chris could shoot, earning a puzzled look from his brother. Moving closer, Luke gently nudged Chris's legs apart. "Your feet should be shoulder-width apart, and keep your elbow steady, or the arrow will just plop to the ground." A

memory of his own lessons surfaced, and he fondly recalled how Aubrey had guided him in much the same way. “I would know.”

Chris shot him a curious look but didn’t push for more details. Instead, he followed Luke’s instructions, shifting his feet into position and gripping the bowstring more firmly. “Like this?”

Humming, Luke gave him a once-over, then placed a finger on his brother’s back to gently correct his posture, making sure he kept it straight. “Alright, now go ahead and shoot.”

Chris pulled back the bowstring, pausing for a heartbeat as he aimed. Then, with a quick release, the arrow shot through the air with a satisfying twang, hitting the bullseye. His brother turned around, a delighted smile spreading across his face, and Luke couldn't help but mirror the expression.

“Congratulations.”

“Thanks,” his brother answered, rubbing the back of his neck sheepishly, glancing up at him. Strangely, his demeanor subtly changed, his shoulders rising a little as if he was preparing for something. “Bro… how do you know I’m your actual brother?”

Blinking rapidly, Luke hesitated for a brief moment, his mind racing to grasp why Chris would ask that. Doubt flickered in his chest, but he shook it off, rubbing the tip of his nose as he searched for a convincing answer. “Well, you look like us—same elfish, mischievous traits—and you’re quite good at picking locks.”

“I see…” Chris mused, his brows furrowing a bit. “But Father did not claim me.”

Unable to suppress a disdainful snort—one that prompted Chris to look at him with a suspicious glint in his eye—Luke quickly masked his reaction with a smile and said carefully, “Father has remained silent for quite a while, Chris. Maybe this… *oversight* is part of that.”

It might have been true at first, but Hermes had been warned and still chose not to act.

*Why? Why? Why?*

“Do you—” Chris blurted out, then caught himself, biting his lip before continuing in a more controlled tone, “Do you think the gods… care? Like, actually care about us?”

*This is dangerous territory,* Luke thought, alarm bells ringing in his head as a heavy feeling settled in his gut at the question.

“The gods don’t see the world the way we do,” he replied, his expression flattening into neutrality.

But it didn’t seem to hinder Chris in any way. His eyes widened, brows knitting together as he leaned forward, locking onto Luke's gaze with an intensity that bordered on desperation. A restless energy radiated from him, causing Luke’s heart to clench.

What was his brother searching for? Why had he brought Luke here?

*What was the goal?*

“If we could build a world where we were respected… would you?” Chris’s voice wavered as his hand clenched Luke’s shirt, his eyes searching Luke’s face with a desperate blend of hope and fear.

Luke’s limbs felt like they were made of lead, the world around him slowing to a crawl as he stared at his brother. He couldn’t speak, couldn’t move—disbelief hit him like a cold wave, leaving him numb. His mind fogged, everything blurred, as if the ground had shifted beneath him and he was left suspended in the weight of it all.

It couldn’t be. He didn’t want to be right—*didn’t want this to be happening.*

He had hoped, deep down, that he was wrong. But now, staring into Chris’s desperate eyes, he knew.

Luke had been right all along, and it tore him apart.

“It was *you*,” he whispered.

Flinching back, Chris released his grip on Luke's shirt, creating space between them as he averted his gaze.

“You did this,” Luke continued, his gaze unblinking as a disdainful laugh escaped his lips. “You’re the traitor.”

“They betrayed us first,” Chris shot back, his voice faltering as he locked eyes with Luke.

“Is that your excuse?” he retorted coldly, feeling the chill settle deep in his bones, seeping down until it reached his heart. Everything felt distant now—his anger, his desperation, his pain—all buried beneath a fragile layer of ice.

“The gods don’t care about us, Luke,” Chris insisted, desperation creeping into his voice. “You know this. How many children have passed by Cabin Eleven’s doors without ever knowing who their parent is?” He lowered his voice to a whisper, adding, “Or worse, who died before they could find out?”

Levi’s pained voice echoed in Luke’s mind, the words *my mother* reverberating in his skull. Feeling unsettled, he ran a hand through his hair, tension coiling in his muscles as he turned away from Chris and began to pace.

“Join me,” the boy pleaded, stepping closer and extending his hand as if he wanted to reach out, but he hesitated and pulled it back. With a whisper, he added, “Please.”

Luke paused. For a fleeting, terrible moment, the idea of joining the other side seeped into his mind—fighting against the gods for the injustices inflicted upon the campers, for the way demigods were treated.

*For his sister. For Levi. For Chris.*

But then reality slammed into him. A sharp jolt of clarity reminded him that Kronos was just more of the same. He wasn't a savior; he was another tyrant, a Titan who devoured his own children.

The fantasy Kronos offered was just that: *a fantasy.*

"No." Luke's voice cut through the tension like shattering glass. "I won't be part of your delusion."

Chris's expression fell, hurt flashing across his face before anger took its place. "This is our chance to fight for ourselves!"

"How so?" Luke asked, his tone neutral and distant, as if everything felt far away. "You only succeeded in making demigods fight against each other."

Clenching his fists, Chris shot back, "Everything would have gone well if it wasn't for Percy. The gods would be fighting against each other, and we could finally have the life we deserve! We would be respected!"

Respected how? In their shrouds, sent to the Underworld? Fighting in a divine battle that had nothing to do with them, for a creature who was using them and their struggles for his own gain?

"Demigods would die, Chris," Luke countered sharply, his jaw tightening as he stared his brother down.

"Don't we die already?"

The coldness that had settled in Luke's bones melted away, replaced by a surge of red-hot anger.

"So you'd have us fight each other for what?" he spat, his voice sharp. "To put a Titan on the throne in place of our parents?"

Chris flinched, his eyes widening with surprise, but the moment passed quickly. His expression hardened. "You've chosen the wrong side, Luke."

Luke snorted, stepping closer. "What side is that? The one that protects demigods—my charges?" His voice grew icier with each word. "Then yeah, I guess I've chosen wrong. Unlike you, who so cleverly stole from the gods, right under their noses, all because a Titan told you to."

"It wasn't just me," Chris revealed, causing Luke to pause. He snapped his gaze to his brother, noting the seriousness in Chris's brown eyes, which had darkened to almost black. With a bitter edge to his voice, his brother continued, "I'm not as good a thief as you, nor as fast. I needed help, and I got it. Ethan changed my luck. I secured the bolt, and by the time the other gods came hunting, it was already in someone else's hands—someone from outside Camp."

Luke stood rooted to the spot, his heart racing as disbelief washed over him.

*More than one thief? Ethan too? Someone from outside?*

*Ares? Or… another demigod?*

"You weren't the only one dreaming, Luke." Clenching his jaw, Luke bristled at the implications, but Chris pressed on, his voice gaining strength. "You should have listened to him. My Lord has offered you a chance many times—more than any other demigod—and you turned him down every time. But he still wants you for some reason."

*For some reason…*

A jolt of realization hit Luke like a blow. Furrowing his brows, he stared at his brother, barely able to mutter, "He told you to convince me."

The silence that followed was deafening. Chris' quiet was answer enough.

Betrayal coursed through him, sharp and jagged, slicing through his insides until he felt raw. Something within him shattered, releasing the beast he had kept restrained, boiling his blood and clouding his vision with a furious red.

Before he could hold it back, poison dripped from his tongue. "Does betraying us make you feel more important, more *seen*? Does it fill that pitiful void inside you from all those years Father never claimed you?"

Chris reared back as if the words had struck him, his body instinctively retreating, fists trembling at his sides. Luke was too deep in his anger to care, feeling a twisted satisfaction that his words had landed, that Chris was hurting just as much as he was.

"What do you know?" the boy exclaimed, clenching his jaw as he glared at Luke, his voice trembling. "You never had to face this. Luke Castellan, the hero who remade Hercules' labors, the best swordsman in three hundred years—perfect Luke." His words dripped with venom as he locked eyes with him. "Father's favorite."

Luke advanced toward his brother, straightening to his full height as he stared down at Chris, whose defiant glare met his own. Agitation simmered beneath Luke's skin, an urge for violence coiling tightly within him, ready to snap.

Then a scream pierced the air—two female screams.

*The nymphs.*

Whipping his head toward the source of the sound, Luke's heart raced like a drum in his chest. Two dryads strained to pull a boy—Percy, God, it was Percy—toward the cabins, their faces twisted in panic.

Alarm surged through Luke, tightening in his chest.

For a heartbeat, time froze as he took in Percy's pale, trembling figure. Then realization crashed over him like a wave.

Poison. Pit scorpion's poison.

As he glanced toward the forest, his eyes caught another figure waving frantically to Chris, urgency lacing every movement. Ethan. Levi's brother.

*Luke had made a mistake.*

The world around him fell silent, and Chris's voice became a distant murmur, as if his ears were stuffed with cotton. But then, one word cut through the haze.

"…brother."

Rage surged within him, like a dam bursting and flooding every cell of his being. The violence thrummed beneath his skin, overwhelming him, as if he were too small to contain the beast inside. In an instant, before he could even realize what he had done, Luke found himself standing over a fallen Chris. The boy stared up at him wide-eyed, fear flickering in his gaze as he curled around himself, cradling his cheek.

"You're no brother of mine."

Chris flinched sharply at that, the words cutting deeper than the blow to his face. A faint twinge of regret flickered in Luke's chest, but it felt distant, overshadowed by anger.

Casting one last disdainful glance at Chris, Luke made his choice. He turned away, racing toward the nymphs, his focus locked on Percy.

As he reached the nymphs, their frantic words barely registered. Urgency surged through him as he hoisted Percy onto his shoulder, securing the boy's arms and legs as he sprinted full speed. The world blurred around him, and he moved with a speed he rarely used—there had been no reason to, until now.

Soon, he found himself at the Big House, where Chiron lifted Percy from his arms and rushed him to the infirmary. Annabeth sent him an uncertain glance as she followed after them.

How had she gotten here?

Luke didn't know; he couldn't remember. The world felt distant now, and his limbs were heavy.

His mind was blank as he sank into one of the armchairs in the living room. For a heartbeat, he stared wide-eyed at the walls, feeling numb. Then, slowly, the world began to come back into focus, and the weight of what had just happened settled heavily on his shoulders.

"Fuck!" he exclaimed, slamming his fist at the arm of his seat.

What had he done? What had he *fucking* done? Chris was his brother—*his brother!*

But he had hit him.

Chris's fear as he cradled his own face flashed through Luke's mind.

Pacing the room now, his agitation increasing with each step. *Percy was in the infirmary because of him,* because Luke had been careless—*stupid*. He should've known there was more than one thief. He should've protected Percy.

He hadn't.

The thought spiraled, his guilt feeding on his agitation, until he finally snapped.

In a surge of fury, his vision blurred as Luke slammed his hands against the wall. *It wasn't enough*. Blind to everything else, he began to kick, punch, and smash anything in sight, the sounds of shattering objects fading into the distance, as if muffled by a thick fog.

He lost track of time. Eventually, fatigue crashed over him, and he collapsed against the wall, the living room a jumbled mass of destruction around him.

Curling into himself, he pressed his head into his hands. The mantra echoed in his mind: *It's your fault. You failed them.*

Belatedly, he felt the familiar warmth of his uncle's aura settling over his skin, a gentle blanket that soothed the raw hurts deep within his soul.

Before long, he found himself enveloped in a warm embrace, a tender hand stroking the back of his head as a voice—Uncle D's, he would recognize it anywhere—hummed softly in his ear.

Then, the tears started to fall.

Chapter End Notes

1 - Sibite baleado - shot (by a bullet, lol) sibite - a sibite is a bird with long, thin legs, so basically, Luke is saying his father is scrawny, lol. It's a colloquial phrase from northeastern Brazil, so people from other regions might not be familiar with it.

Well, another summer has ended, and we have some foreshadowing here as well. Dean has some real issues with how the satyrs operate, and he's pretty mad about it. Luke understands, yet at the same time, doesn't, since satyr politics aren't exactly his forte. Then we have Grover going on his mission to find Pan, and we all know how that went…

And then there's Chris. I thought long and hard about who would be the thief and eventually concluded that, since Luke wasn't going to be one, the only solution was to make it a group effort. Among them, there had to be a child of Hermes, for obvious reasons (thief), but also Ethan, for his luck manipulation ability (yep, Chiara's mention at the beginning was foreshadowing) and his loyalty to his mom. Plus, he's Levi's brother, which adds to the emotional impact… and there are some others on the outside who'll be revealed later. It was a whole operation, all because Luke wasn't there, lol.

In any case, thanks for reading! Comments are always appreciated! And it doesn't matter if you're late to the party!

Any guesses on why Hermes didn't claim Chris and is silent now?

# Chapter 42: TLT - Exposure

Chapter Summary

> Luke dreams again, and Kronos changes his approach once more. Then Luke does something incredibly stupid and nearly dies.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

> “I’m sorry, master,” Chris’ voice was small and fragile, as if he’d regressed into the frightened boy who first arrived at Camp—the boy who froze instead of running when the pressure became too much.
>
> It was the first time since *that* day that Luke had seen his brother, and though only a few days had passed, it felt like a lifetime.
>
> At first glance, Chris looked almost the same—broader than most of the other Hermes kids, with his familiar dark brown curls. But one thing stood out immediately: Chris wasn’t wearing the usual orange Camp shirt. Instead, a plain white t-shirt clung to him, dull and lifeless, as though someone had drained the color from him, along with all the brightness he used to carry. His skin was pale, his hands trembling—already enough to give away his state. But it was the look on Chris’ face that made Luke freeze.
>
> He looked terrified.
>
> A deep urge to step forward and comfort Chris washed over Luke, but, as much as it pained him, he couldn’t bring himself to do it. This was a dream, after all. He recognized the shimmering surfaces around him, the walls and floor rippling as if they weren’t entirely solid.
>
> It wasn’t a good sign.
>
> He wasn’t sure which real place this dreamscape was mirroring, but the familiar coldness and darkness, combined with Chris’ mention of ‘master,’ narrowed the already short list of suspects to just one: Kronos.
>
> Clenching his jaw, Luke scanned his surroundings with a wary eye. It was dark—perhaps a cavern. The walls felt rough and rocky, though he couldn’t be sure. The smell was nauseating: a metallic stench, mingled with the scent of decayed things long forgotten, yet still half-alive. It was so strong that it made his eyes water, prompting him to cover his nose with the collar of his shirt, though that didn’t help much.
>
> In the center of it all stood Chris, with a massive hole yawning in the ground before him—perfectly round, as if it had been deliberately carved, its smooth edges too precise. *Too*

*unnatural.* The feeling it gave Luke was unsettling. He didn't want to go near it. It felt like if he did, it would try to pull him down, swallowing him whole. Even from a distance, the cold radiated off the hole, chilling him to the bone, and he couldn't understand how Chris could stand to be so close to it.

If Luke concentrated on it, he could almost hear the whispering of *things* emanating from it—sharp and lamenting, even frenzied—making the hair on his arms stand on end.

Suddenly, a voice emerged from the others, cold and powerful, as if a giant were rising from the depths. It was a voice that had haunted Luke's dreams for months and now lingered in his waking moments as well.

"Your apologies will not erase your failures, demigod," Kronos intoned, his voice low and menacing, *displeased.*

"Please, master, grant me another chance!" Chris implored, his voice cracking, fists clenched so tight that his knuckles turned white. "I promise I'll succeed this time!"

"Succeed?" Kronos echoed, his whisper somehow deafening, reverberating inside Luke's head with such force that he stepped back, pressing against the cold wall—*everything here was cold.* "There are no second chances, demigod. You left that place, severed your ties. Do you really think they'll accept you back after everything?"

Chris' eyes widened, and his voice stumbled out weak and garbled—*God, he looked so young*—as he tried again, "My Lord—"

"Silence," Kronos interrupted, his tone sharp. "I tire of your pleading. You have failed, and that is final."

*Failed? Is this about me?* Luke thought, furrowing his brow.

For a brief moment, he considered what Kronos might want from him, but the sight of his brother curling in on himself, suddenly so small, made it impossible to focus.

He had to wrestle with the urge to rush forward and reach for Chris, forcing himself to remember that Kronos controlled everything in this place, and that his interference could be useless—or worse, harmful to his brother. Besides, Luke wanted to listen, hoping to glean something useful from the conversation.

But a nagging voice in his mind whispered that if he was here, it was because Kronos had wanted him to be, that he had intended for Luke to witness this.

Kronos, completely unsympathetic, continued, his voice now laced with a cruel amusement, though still cold and commanding: "For your failure, perhaps a punishment is in order."

*Punishment?*

Luke tensed, instinctively trying to move, but to his growing panic, he couldn't. His legs refused to obey, as if the ground itself was holding him in place, forcing him to stay still and watch.

A slow, deliberate gust of wind swept through the space, sending a chill across Luke's skin. He tried to remind himself that this was just a dream—a dream couldn't harm him or Chris. But the cold felt real.

*Too real.*

Rooted to the spot by forces stronger than him, Luke was helpless as the icy presence—Kronos' aura, it had to be—wrapped itself around Chris. He watched, horror mounting, as his brother buckled under the weight, collapsing to his knees. The sound of Chris' ragged breathing filled the air, punctuated by low moans of pain, each one twisting like a knife in Luke's heart.

But he couldn't do anything.

Chris trembled violently, hands scrabbling at the ground, fingers clawing desperately as if searching for something—anything—to hold onto. His nails scraped against the stone, splintering and breaking, leaving streaks of red on the cold surface.

And all the while, Luke was forced to watch, helpless, as guilt gnawed at him with every passing second. His agitation surged, his eyes wide and locked on Chris' crumpled form.

*This was his fault. Luke had failed him.*

Then Kronos spoke, his voice low and cutting. "You could have prevented this, demigod. You could have swayed him—you're his brother, aren't you? One of his precious charges?" His tone turned into a venomous whisper. "It should have been easy. But you failed. Worse yet, you pushed him away with your petty jealousy."

The pressure intensified, and even Luke, standing far from the gaping hole, could feel it. Chris arched in agony, gasping for breath, buckling further under the crushing, invisible weight. He couldn't speak—he was in too much pain.

But Kronos didn't seem to care.

"We've lost a key piece," the Titan continued, his voice sharp with irritation. "If we had him, we could destabilize our enemies. The gods would be thrown into chaos, knowing that the hero who once retrieved the golden apple now stands against them. Camp Half-Blood would become vulnerable, making its demigods easier to sway to our side." Kronos's tone turned disdainful. "And that ability of his… you alienated the only child of Hermes in centuries who had it."

Chris managed to gasp out an apology—at least, that's what Luke thought he heard from where he stood.

His heart clenched at the sight, desperation clawing at him. *He had to move*. He tried again, forcing his legs to respond, but they wouldn't budge. It felt as if his feet were glued to the ground, no matter how hard he strained.

With a disdainful sigh and a gust of icy wind that made Luke's hair stand on end, Kronos spoke again. "I suppose there's little more you can do, and I'm growing tired of this. Go back."

For a brief moment, nothing happened. Then the crushing weight and cold began to recede, though not entirely. Chris collapsed, coughing violently, the sound harsh and desperate. Luke's chest tightened with the urge to help, but in the time it took him to blink, his brother vanished.

The fact that he remained confirmed Luke's suspicions: his presence here was no accident.

Warily, he stayed where he was, his heart pounding in his ears as he stared at the massive hole in the ground. A whisper in his mind told him what it was: *Tartarus*. An entrance to Tartarus.

But there was no time to dwell on it, as Kronos addressed him directly. His voice had softened but remained sharp, like a blade hidden under silk. "Do you see, demigod? Your lack of action has consequences. He suffers because you abandoned him to face this alone. How does it feel to know you're the reason he's brought so low?"

Instantly, a lump formed in Luke's throat, the guilt he'd carried since that day crashing over him.

*It's my fault. My fault.*

At the same time, a familiar storm roared inside him—the fury, hurt, anger, and despair that had consumed him for days. It was the beast that had taken control, one he could barely hold back anymore, and even now it threatened to break loose.

"He suffers because of you," Luke shot back, his voice sharp, though it wavered slightly.

Kronos laughed, the sound bouncing off the cavern walls, sharp and grating, making his ears ring.

"He failed, and so he is punished," Kronos said, as if torturing Luke's brother was no more than a trivial consequence. "But he wouldn't have to suffer like this… if you had come to me." His tone shifted, more persuasive, almost tempting. "Perhaps he can still be spared…"

For a heartbeat, Luke didn't understand what Kronos had said. Then the words sank in.

*How dare he? How dare he use his brother against him?*

Disbelief washed over him, mingling with a flicker of hope that churned violently in his chest alongside the burning anger. His hands clenched into fists at his sides, muscles coiling with tension as he processed Kronos' words.

He hated feeling this hope; he knew it was just a trick, tightening the knot in his chest even more.

Then he felt it again—the pressure building, a surge of negative emotions growing stronger. With a detached sense of familiarity, Luke sensed that flood leaving him, a wave of power rippling outward, destabilizing everything around him. The world shook, and exhaustion gripped him, his limbs trembling and his breath quickening.

But even as his energy drained, he heard one last thing before the dreamscape collapsed in on itself.

“You’ll regret many things yet, Luke Castellan.”

He woke with a gasp, quickly stifling it, his hands trembling slightly as the words echoed in his mind on repeat. Taking slow, controlled breaths, he tried to calm himself, and gradually, he felt his hands steady and his muscles begin to relax.

For a long moment, Luke lay in his bed, staring blankly at the bunk above him. Numbness settled in, and the weariness clung to him, making his limbs feel heavy even in the waking world, a chill lingering on his skin.

A sudden jolt of fear shot through him. If he felt this exhausted in the real world from using his powers, what kind of pain was Chris experiencing from Kronos’ punishment?

But he had no answer.

He pushed the thought aside—it would only lead to more pain. He was just so… tired. Taking a deep breath, he squeezed his eyes shut, trying to will the tears away.

When he felt steadier, Luke sat up in his bed and glanced at the kids who had stayed behind.

Every summer's end felt like this—a crowded cabin gradually emptying. Cabin Eleven never truly felt empty, but enough campers had left for everyone to at least have a bed to call their own.

For a moment, he simply watched them sleep—the gentle rise and fall of their chests, their peaceful faces, free from nightmares. *Thank the Lord for that*. It brought him a flicker of warmth, even as he still felt cold and hollow inside.

It had been days since he’d felt any different, ever since Chris… Chris had betrayed them. And Kronos—

Luke stood abruptly. Without bothering to change, he slipped on his slippers and quietly left the cabin, easing the door shut behind him.

Outside, he took a deep breath, letting the crisp morning air fill his lungs. It was cool and clean, a small comfort, and he looked up at the still-dark sky.

It was early—very early. The cabins were dark, the campgrounds quiet. Only the faint glow from the Artemis cabin stood out, dimming as the first hints of dawn approached. The area was empty, almost haunting, yet still oddly peaceful, with only the soft rustling of leaves and the whisper of the wind breaking the silence. Not even the birds had begun to stir, and most of the Camp, including the nature spirits who usually woke with the sunrise, were still asleep.

But it didn’t bother him. He wanted to be alone. The thought of sharing space right now felt suffocating, tightening his chest until it was hard to breathe.

He still felt like he’d been cut open, like a knife had sliced through him and left him exposed and bleeding, raw and jagged—fragile, even.

As he walked, he noticed the harpies flying overhead, finishing their night watch. Their beady eyes glared down at him, but Luke only spared them a passing glance. They responded with low, irritated sounds—not daring to screech and risk waking the campers, which would no doubt annoy Mr. D.

Luke wasn’t afraid of them. He was too big for them to try and scare him anymore—he could trash them easily if it came to that—so they kept their distance, voicing their displeasure in those grating little noises.

When he was younger, a small, scared boy newly ripped from home, he would've been terrified—*had* been terrified. He still remembered his first encounter with a monster: a harpy, nothing like the fat ones at Camp. The one in his memories was lean, with huge wings and a sharp, vicious grin. It had chased him through the streets, his heart pounding as he ran, desperate for a place to hide. Somehow, through a mix of luck and quick thinking, he managed to kill it.

Back then, it had felt so difficult. Now, looking back, it seemed almost simple compared to the weight of his current problems.

He sighed heavily, wandering until he reached the forest, his steps instinctively leading him away from the Archery Range before he could even glance at it. The memories felt too fresh, and he couldn't bear to look in that direction, especially since a flash of Chris filled his mind every time, making him more miserable. Because of that, he had been skipping archery classes, but Chiron never brought it up, and neither did Lee, even though Luke could tell his friend wanted to.

Shaking his head to clear those thoughts, Luke stepped into the forest, wandering without a clear destination. He just wanted to be alone, and the woods were one of the few places where he could find that peace. Here, he felt a calmness that avoided him in the cabins or anywhere else in the Camp.

The smell of damp earth and decaying leaves, the sight of towering trees older and more enduring than he could ever be, and the playful rustle of the wind weaving through the branches—all of it eased the tension coiling in his chest. But this time, the knot of negativity was too tight to be soothed so easily, too suffocating to ignore.

Still, the forest offered a semblance of solace.

Unconsciously, his feet carried him to a familiar clearing—one most campers didn’t visit since it was tucked away from the cabins and the areas where the nature spirits lived. The space was small, nearly swallowed by the wild, but it still had a patch of open ground, with a few rocks scattered about, some big enough to support his weight. He especially liked how the light filtered through the trees, casting dappled shadows on the ground.

In a childish part of himself, Luke couldn't help but compare it to a fantasy grove. The thought brought a fleeting smile, but it vanished just as quickly.

Stepping fully into the clearing, he walked past the rocks and trees, eventually stopping in front of a bush. For a moment, he hesitated, staring at it numbly, before taking a deep breath and crouching down. He pushed aside the branches and leaves, dismantling the bush until it became clear that it had never been a bush at all.

Beneath the foliage lay a patch of dirt that had remained undisturbed.

Luke stared at it for a moment before shaking his head and starting to dig, his hands sinking into the soft, slightly damp earth without hesitation. In a distant part of his mind, he felt a strange thrill at the destruction, as if he could use his bare hands to make something look as ruined as he felt.

Soon, he had dug a hole in the ground, uncovering a bundle wrapped in a couple of plastic sacks. Unbidden, relief coursed through him at the sight—it was just as he had left it.

He lifted the bundle into his hands and rose to his feet, settling onto a nearby rock. As he sat, he began to unwrap it, neatly folding the plastic bags and placing a rock on top to keep them from blowing away. Before long, he found himself holding the jewelry box that Mercury had given him, resting in his lap.

It felt like a lifetime ago that day had happened.

Luke opened the box, gazing at the pair of earrings—jewels worth more than anything he had ever touched. He admired them for a moment before carefully picking one up. Lifting it toward the sky, he tilted it just right, and the morning sun made it gleam like polished silver.

Pulling his hand back, he rolled the earring in his palm absentmindedly. He didn't quite understand why he had come here to dig it out. A jumble of reasons raced through his mind, but none felt right, especially when he was so lost and unsure of his own emotions.

Maybe it was because he needed a distraction, or maybe it was just because it was there. Perhaps he simply thought it was pretty and wanted to admire it again.

Whatever the reason, it was better than facing the reality that summer was over—that some of the little charges he was responsible for were now outside the protection of the Camp's barriers, and that some wouldn't come back, whether due to death or joining the enemy. It was easier than thinking about Percy, that stubborn boy who had decided to leave, or about his brother—*Chris's pain flickered through his mind*—and Ethan.

Ethan… Luke was unsure how to feel about him or the things Percy said he had revealed. Levi's brother had given Percy a cursed bracelet—now in Tartarus—a substitute for the flying shoes from the books, but *this* curse was far more complex. Percy explained that the bracelet had latched on tightly and was nearly impossible to remove, almost dragging him into Tartarus if Annie hadn't used her knife to cut it off, nearly severing the kid's wrist in the process.

However, Percy had said Ethan confessed he hadn't been the one to put in the curse; that had come from somewhere else, from someone outside—a person skilled in magic.

That worried him, just as the looming threat of war did.

Furrowing his brows, he clenched his fist around the earring, pressing it into his palm, but the slight pain barely registered. His thoughts were focused on more pressing concerns. Luke knew an attack on the Camp's defenses was coming, and he even *knew* how it would happen: they would poison Thalia's tree, drastically weakening the magical barriers.

Then the Sea of Monsters…

Clenching his jaw, Luke questioned whether he was doing anything right. He felt like a failure—too weak to make any real change, his presence seeming utterly pointless.

What was the use of being an anomaly if it only made things more complicated?

His brother was in Kronos' hands. So was Levi's brother. And an unknown agent lurked just outside, someone who could be *anyone*.

Unbidden, Mercury's aura stirred in his chest, pulsing rhythmically as it reached out to touch his own energy, attempting to transform its own sharp edges into something gentler, something soothing.

A sharp surge of anger coursed through him at the thought of how the gods and their twisted games were making his life a living hell. It crackled in his veins like electricity, fueling a tempest of frustration that intensified the burning sensation coursing through his already sensitive body. Uncontrolled, his thoughts spiraled, crashing in on him and tightening his chest, worsening the knot of negativity inside. This only made the aura stir more vigorously, trying to calm Luke.

But it succeeded only in doing the opposite.

Drowning in his fury, Luke felt like he was underwater. The anger grew stronger, and he belatedly wondered if he could regain control. Before he could think better of it—*too angry, too hurt to care*—he directed his attention to the aura, which seemed to sense the shift in his emotions and became more agitated, latching onto him.

*I want this out*, he thought distantly.

The pressure that had been bubbling beneath his skin erupted, releasing a powerful surge from Luke. His energy expanded and contracted, swirling around the foreign presence as it pushed back, slapping its tendrils aside in a bid to break free. For a moment, it seemed to be working, bringing him a flicker of relief.

Until it all started to go wrong.

The aura froze for a heartbeat, then something shifted. Luke felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end as the presence grew increasingly agitated. This time, it was no longer gentle but frenzied—confused, almost. It expanded violently, leaving him feeling bloated, as

if his chest might burst. It began to burrow deeper, forcefully latching onto his energy, gripping it tightly and pinning it in place, thwarting his attempts to expel it.

Coughing, Luke leaned forward onto his hands and knees, choking as he struggled to breathe, wondering if he might expel a piece of himself with how much he was heaving.

Then the aura burrowed even deeper, latching on with relentless force, as if declaring it wouldn't leave. Luke froze as a sharp jolt of pain shot from his chest to his limbs, igniting his nerves like fire. He trembled violently, shaking as another wave of coughs forced their way from his throat.

Distantly, too consumed by pain to think straight, he felt something wet spill from his mouth, the taste metallic. Another jolt of agony forced him to arch his back, and he retched, the substance that came out was red.

*Blood.*

*Luke was vomiting blood.*

Fear seized him, and desperation clouded his senses, blurring his vision. Was it from pain? From fear? From the blood?

He didn't know. All he knew was that he was terrified.

Collapsing onto the ground, still struggling to catch his breath, Luke felt weak and battered, overwhelmed by regret for the sheer stupidity of what he had just attempted.

*This was the aura of a god.*

Would he die here?

The thought gripped his spine with icy fingers, and his mind raced in search of a solution, any glimmer of hope. But he was too weak, too lost. He needed help.

Who? Who could save him?

*Mr. D.*

The thought of his uncle pierced through the fog of panic, overriding his instinct to keep his secrets hidden. The need to stop the pain outweighed any concern about the potential consequences.

With a weak voice, he struggled to speak, managing to let out a raspy whisper that burned his throat. "Dionysus."

Then his head dropped against the ground as he fought for breath, waiting and hoping that his uncle had heard his call. Calling his name had to be enough, especially since he rarely did something so disrespectful.

*It had to be enough*.

Luke couldn't walk or move away from this spot, and there wasn't a soul around to help him —this place was far too isolated.

As he closed his eyes, striving to endure the pain, each wave made him want to retch again. Suddenly, the familiar scent of grapes filled the clearing, wafting into his nostrils and bringing an immediate sense of calm.

Uncle D was here.

For a moment, relief washed over him, making him forget his pain. But it was short-lived; the agony returned with a vengeance, and he coughed out ragged breaths, expelling a blob of bright red blood.

As soon as Luke spat out the blood, his uncle appeared beside him, quickly pulling him up and guiding him back to the rock where he had been just moments before the pain had overwhelmed him.

With bleary eyes and blurred vision, Luke could just make out the horns and the dark, purplish hair of Dionysus.

Before Luke could ponder this too deeply, his mouth was pried open, and a liquid was poured into him. The taste reminded him of home—of meals shared with his once-family and the food he now enjoyed with his grandmother. Warmth flooded through him, and gradually, his vision cleared. The coughing subsided, and he found he could breathe again without feeling like each breath was a struggle.

Taking a deep breath, he lifted his gaze to meet his uncle's fiery purple eyes, narrowed and focused intently on him. Mr. D wore a frown, a serious expression that was rare for him. Normally so nonchalant, seeing him like this made Luke instinctively avert his gaze.

He could already feel an uncomfortable conversation on the horizon.

"What happened?" Mr. D demanded, his voice sharp as his gaze swept across Luke's face.

Luke pressed his lips together, stubbornly maintaining his silence as he gazed at the greenery surrounding him, stealing glances at his uncle's form out of the corner of his eye.

With irritation flashing in his eyes, causing the purple flames within them to flicker, Dionysus straightened to his full height—towering above his usual fat camp director guise—and loomed over him. "*Luke Castellan*."

Once more, Luke remained silent, furrowing his brows as he focused on a patch of grass beside him, deliberately avoiding his uncle's gaze. He knew he needed to speak, but the words felt trapped inside him—heavy and difficult to voice. Yet, despite his resolve, he found himself glancing at the jewelry box on the ground, where the pair of earrings lay haphazardly on the grass, glinting in the sunlight.

With a frown, Mr. D followed Luke's gaze, taking a moment to observe the earrings before snapping his fingers. The earrings zipped into the box, which then appeared in his lap. He

inspected it carefully, flipping it over until he noticed the symbol on top.

*Opulentia.*

“I know this store,” his uncle remarked casually, still not looking at Luke, though his grip on the box tightened. “It’s a very exclusive establishment.” Then, glancing sideways, Mr. D added, “How did you get this, Luke? And don’t try to dodge the question or change the subject.”

Fidgeting with his fingers, Luke pressed his lips together, feeling Mr. D’s gaze weigh down on him like a noose. His uncle was furious, but there was no escaping the truth now, no matter how fast his heart raced or how icy fingers gripped his gut.

*How would his uncle react?*

The truth clawed at his throat, and after a deep breath, he finally confessed, “A god took me there.”

Mr. D’s posture straightened, his expression darkening as his eyes burned with an intense glow.

“A god?” he demanded, disbelief dripping from his voice. He paused, as if a thought had struck him, then glared and huffed, frustration clear in the sound. “Those rumors… I didn’t take them seriously, especially with Hermes being such a nuisance, trying to keep the others away with the patronage—”

*Keeping the others away?* The thought flashed through Luke’s mind, but he barely had time to process it before his uncle cut himself off, his expression shifting to one of realization.

“But your father only holds influence on the Greek side…” Mr. D muttered under his breath, his eyes narrowing as they scrutinized Luke. “That stupid quest you went to all those years ago—what do you remember?”

*Fuck.*

Luke's heart raced as he stared at his uncle, panic tightening his throat. He felt completely speechless, unable to muster a defense or any clever retort that would convince Mr. D he didn’t remember anything.

Finally, unable to resist the urge—and feeling it might be the final nail in his coffin—his gaze slipped back to the jewelry box.

Uncle D’s breath hitched, and his aura flared. “You remember. The Roman didn’t take away your memories.”

Quietly, meekly even, Luke nodded.

At this point, there was no reason to keep it secret anymore. He only hoped his uncle wouldn’t get angry—*angrier*. More importantly, he hoped he could keep his memories. As

much as he resented the arrangement Mercury had forced on him without consent, Luke liked having his mind intact.

His memories were what made him who he was—without them, what would he be?

"That Roman even gave you this," Mr. D mused, inspecting the earrings inside the box. He picked one up, turning it over carefully in his fingers. Narrowing his eyes, he examined it closely. "*Silver,* with a meander pattern."

Unable to keep quiet anymore, Luke confessed, "He gave it to me at the beginning of this summer."

A tense silence hung between them as Mr. D closed his eyes and took a deep breath. When he reopened them, annoyance etched across his face. He drawled, "Let me guess: you were ambushed on the day you decided to go to Camp alone, insisting you were now an *adult* and that monsters wouldn't come after you."

Luke's silence was damning.

Uncle D didn't wait for a response. "I know who it is. That explains why your father's been even more of a nuisance these past few years." He turned sharply, glancing at the blood-stained ground before locking eyes with Luke again. "Now, how is that connected to you vomiting blood?" His eyes narrowed, the purple deepening as he hissed, "What did he do?"

Dread clawed at Luke's throat. *How could he possibly answer that?* Every thought that came to mind seemed absurd, but there was no avoiding it.

"He… the first time, back in San Francisco, he ambushed us and took away Kat's memories," Luke began, a chill creeping down his spine as he recalled that awful day. He stopped short of mentioning Levi's death, the thought too heavy to voice. "When it was my turn, he toyed with me, said something about teaching me respect. Then—then he used his aura on me." His voice faltered, and he fought to suppress a shiver. He decided not to mention how Mercury had stolen his energy—just the fact that the god had left his aura on him was damning enough. With a shaky breath, he pressed on, "He left a piece of his essence on me—I think that's what he called it. And when I tried to get rid of it, well… you saw what happened."

For a long moment, there was only silence. His uncle stared at him, his brow furrowing as if he was trying to make sense of what he'd just heard.

Finally, disbelief mingled with rising fury in Mr. D's voice as he repeated, "He left a piece of his essence on you?" His aura flared, crackling angrily in the air. "The arrogance, the sheer entitlement—leaving his mark on you, as if it were—"

He stopped abruptly when he saw Luke's wide eyes, making an effort to rein in his temper. His aura softened, but the purple in his eyes still glowed intensely.

"Romans," Mr. D uttered harshly. "It happened. *Fine*," he continued, his voice tight with restrained anger. Then he met Luke's gaze, his expression firm. "I'll take it out."

Before Luke could protest, Mr. D's aura surged forward, pressing gently against his skin. It wasn't the sharp, invasive pain he'd felt with Mercury's aura all those years ago, but the sensation of it slipping beneath his skin was still unsettling. His uncle was clearly trying to be careful, making an effort not to cause any more pain.

That gentleness vanished the moment Mr. D reached Mercury's aura.

As soon as the two energies collided, Mercury's aura erupted violently, its agitation far more intense than before. Luke doubled over, instinctively clutching his chest as a wave of pain coursed through him. Mr. D's aura recoiled instantly, and with that, Mercury's essence settled —no longer attacking, but still restless, coiling around Luke's energy as if seeking reassurance.

Luke's breaths came in shaky gasps, his chest tightening as he struggled to recover.

With a furrowed brow, fingers tapping restlessly against his thigh, Mr. D snapped, "I can't take it out like this. It's too entangled with you, and you're too sensitive."

Luke, still gasping, managed only a frantic glance at his uncle, his thoughts a whirlwind of fear.

"But maybe if someone with similar domains—"

"No!" Luke interrupted, straightening up, eyes wide with panic. "Not my father. No."

Dionysus stared at him, concern and irritation mingling on his face.

"He could help you, when I," he sighed dramatically, frustration lacing his words, "admittedly could not."

"No," Luke repeated, his voice trembling. "The last time—it was painful."

Mr. D gave him a long, unreadable look before shifting his gaze to the earring again, his expression carefully blank.

A heavy silence hung in the air, and Luke's mind raced with countless potential solutions— anything to keep his father out of this. He feared that Hermes might accidentally kill him while trying to remove the aura. *What if he lost control again?*

Then, a sudden idea sparked in his mind. He remembered how Mercury had been almost… mellow with him that day.

A flash of memory struck Luke as he recalled how the god had paraded that ball of blue and peach energy, implying that it mirrored Luke's personality. If he could apply that same logic to Mercury—especially considering how the god's aura reacted to him…

Tentatively, Luke suggested, "Maybe I can convince Mer—"

"No." His uncle's voice cut through the air like a knife, aura flaring against him once more. "And don't you say that name."

Luke's heart pounded uncontrollably, and the aura inside him seemed to pulse in unison. "But Uncle, he's the one who put it there, he *can* take it out."

Making a displeased face, Dionysus shot Luke a disgruntled look, his brow furrowing. "And do you have that certainty? What if he refuses?" Leaning forward, Mr. D's voice took on a sharp edge as he added, "What if he's angry about this foolish decision you just attempted?"

"I can convince him," Luke insisted, his nerves buzzing with restless energy. He widened his eyes and whispered, "*Please*, Uncle."

His uncle stared at him for a heartbeat, the emotions on his face shifting faster than Luke could grasp. His gaze fell to the blood-soaked grass, then returned to the earrings. With a deep sigh, he reluctantly handed the box back to Luke.

"Well, if this is your choice, it would be unlike me to hold it against you," he grumbled. "But if it goes wrong, don't expect me to have much sympathy. I'll be the first to remind you that I warned you."

Relief washed over Luke, and he smiled slightly, giving his uncle a quick side hug before leaning back into his own space, savoring the moment. After a brief silence, he quietly asked, "Do you have any advice?"

Mr. D's distaste for the situation was clear as he turned to face Luke fully, his expression serious. "Use the earrings as a peace offering. He gave you those for some…" Dionysus trailed off, his face tightening as if he knew but didn't want to say it aloud. "...reason. It might make him less likely to lash out if he sees you wearing something he gifted you, especially after sensing your attempt to get rid of the other thing." His gaze bore into Luke's as he added, "It sends a message that you're not entirely rebuffing him."

*Rebuffing?* The word echoed in Luke's mind, stirring a thought. Tentatively, he asked, "Would a ritual or some sort of ceremony work, too?"

Mr. D hummed thoughtfully before replying, "Yes, it's a way to honor the gods and flatter them. It might make him more willing to listen—and less displeased too." His face twisted with distaste. "But don't go around doing that little ritual here. I don't want that Roman stink near my Camp."

"Then where?" Luke asked, feeling a bit more hopeful.

"You're visiting your grandmother soon, aren't you? Go do it there then."

Chapter End Notes

Chris is being used against Luke here, since he wasn't successful in bringing Luke to Kronos' side. And well, there are reasons for that, as Kronos mentioned regarding Luke's power and how rare it is. 👀👀👀👀

Luke is not fine—like, at all. So the boiling point was inevitable, especially after everything that's happened. And then there are his thoughts that maybe he isn't doing enough, that he could do more, along with fears for the future, fate, and all that. The future looks bleak, but maybe he can still do something.

Dionysus is a god of revelry, which encompasses the celebration of life and personal freedom. That's one reason he allowed Luke to do it, despite being incredibly displeased. The other is… well, there really isn't another choice here, especially after Hermes violently removed that little magic Dio had put on Luke. Hermes is the only one who could possibly do something, but he's not exactly someone to be trusted in this situation. Besides, there's that little thing Mercury mentioned in the first chapter of this TLT arc about the Greeks not being able to interfere, which ties into the blurring between the pantheons' spheres of influence, so to speak. And whose domain governs those kinds of relations? Hermes… and Mercury. So yeah, Mercury is a cunning dude. Then there's the whole not-interfering-all-that-much-with-mortals'-choices thing—well, that's more questionable. But then again, Luke is Christian, and no one's said much about it, so there's that.

Well, a Mercury encounter is right around the corner. And Mr. D finally knows what his nephew was suffering through for five years. Finally. The aura reveals a lot about Mercury—that was my way of including him in the story without him actually appearing. So you can draw your own conclusions about it, lol.

In any case, thanks for reading! Comments are always appreciated! And it doesn't matter if you're late to the party!

Any theories on why Mr. D reacted that way to Mercury's aura being inside Luke? Aside from the general assholery, of course.

# Chapter 43: TLT - Preparation

Chapter Summary

> Luke prepares to call Mercury. His grandma dumps more information on him, and he reaches out to someone who knows more than he does—only to end up getting his mind blown a little.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Luke adjusted his bag one last time, settling the strap over his shoulder, then turned to his uncle with a nod.

With an exaggerated sigh, Mr. D gave Luke a disgruntled look. Even so, he rested a hand on Luke's shoulder, letting his aura spread slowly, each movement deliberate and controlled.

But it didn't help much.

The sensation, as always, was overwhelming. His nerves were still raw from his admittedly foolish attempt to rid himself of Mercury's aura, and it stung more than usual, despite Dionysus's careful touch. It was simply... too much. A relentless prickling crawled over his skin, the pressure swelling like a rising tide until it felt as though he were being crushed from all sides.

Thankfully, he didn't have to endure the sensation for long. Just as the pain threatened to ignite all his nerves, they arrived.

Luke opened his eyes, startled to find he'd closed them. He blinked rapidly to clear the spots in his vision, a slight dizziness lingering as he staggered and turned his head to scan the surroundings. The movement sent the world spinning for a moment before it settled. Once he felt steadier, he resumed his examination and realized that Mr. D had brought them to the front of his grandmother's house.

It was late afternoon, the sky painted in shades of orange, purple, and red—though it felt more like early evening. They had arrived at this time only because his uncle had dawdled, though Luke didn't complain much about it; a part of him was even grateful for the delay. He still felt the phantom pains from *that*, and the thought of facing that god again sent a shiver down his spine.

Still, they were here, and it was only because Mr. D had reluctantly agreed to let him go, though he hadn't held back in voicing his doubts about the idea—multiple times.

But in this situation, there was no other choice. Not really.

“Lucy, there’s still time to change your mind,” Mr. D drawled, his tone disinterested. But the creases at the corners of his eyes and the slight downturn of his mouth betrayed his concern.

“Uncle,” Luke sighed deeply, rubbing his temples as exasperation creeped through the storm of nervousness raging inside him. “You know this is the only way.”

“Not the only way,” Uncle D countered immediately, glancing at him from the corner of his eye.

Luke pressed his lips together, refusing to answer. There was no way he would let his father find out about this.

*Absolutely none.*

With a huff, his uncle crossed his arms but didn’t protest. Mr. D understood, as well as Luke did, that his father was unpredictable at the best of times. This situation was far too delicate to risk it.

After a moment’s hesitation, his expression changed as he turned to Luke. “Do you even know how to perform the ritual?”

Luke shifted on his feet, weighing his words before answering cautiously, “I have some information on the Roman rituals. I don’t think they’re much different from ours.”

With a disdainful snort, Mr. D said, “Hah, still Roman. Not Greek.” He gave Luke a pointed look. “Remember that, Lucy. You don’t want to cause any offense.”

“I don’t plan to,” Luke replied, tightening his grip on the straps of his backpack as a knot of anxiety settled in his gut.

To be honest, he felt uncertain about all of this, especially since information on the Romans was scarce, even after scouring every book available. It wasn’t surprising that Camp Half-Blood didn’t focus on those topics, being a Greek camp for Greek demigods, but Luke was still irked by it.

What if he did something wrong and ended up making Mercury even more displeased than he already was?

Mr. D hummed, giving him a scrutinizing glance before letting out a dramatic sigh. “Well, I suppose I might offer a tip then.” His expression transformed into a mask of neutrality, but his eyes glinted with disdain. “Keep in mind that the Romans are more about following…” He made a displeased face. “…formalized rituals, the ones full of bureaucracy.”

Fixing Luke with a piercing stare, he added, “Be careful.”

“What kind of formality?” Luke asked, curiosity battling the unease churning in his stomach. Doubts crept in—was this really a good idea?

Suddenly, he felt so ill-prepared.

“Priests, for one—the institutionalized kind,” Mr. D replied, casting him a sidelong glance.

With a sudden jolt of dread, Luke muttered, his wide eyes fixed on his uncle, “I don’t have a priest.”

“Calm down, brat,” his uncle said, rolling his eyes. “There are private rituals too; you don’t need a priest for those. You just need to be mindful of the steps, and I suppose that will suffice.”

Unbidden, relief coursed through Luke, but it quickly gave way to a gnawing thought as the ritual inched closer and closer. “Uncle… will my memories be removed after this?”

“At this point, no,” Dionysus replied, gesturing dismissively at Luke’s chest. “That… thing there complicates things.”

His uncle’s words made sense. It was far too late to make Luke forget, especially with Mercury so invested in him. Still, nervous energy bubbled beneath his skin, tightening his breath and making him feel uncertain.

What about the Greek side? While his uncle seemed disinterested in meddling with his memories, what would the others think?

Hesitating, Luke glanced at his grandmother’s house. The doors were closed, and she hadn’t appeared yet—she probably didn’t even realize they’d arrived. He turned back to his uncle, his heart racing and palms clammy. “And about the other gods? You won’t tell my father, right?”

Dionysus rolled his eyes—*rude*—but Luke was too anxious to care much. “I won’t be the one spilling the beans to the others,” he said, waving a hand dismissively. “Not my problem. Besides, that would just make things even more unpleasant and far more complicated than they need to be.”

“Yeah, so Father won’t know either, right?” Luke pressed, locking his gaze on his uncle.

“No, he won’t,” Mr. D grumbled, narrowing his eyes at Luke. With a sigh, he gestured for Luke to follow. “In any case, since we’re already here, let’s meet your grandmother and get this over with. The sooner you do this, the sooner you’re free from that thing, and the fewer headaches.”

Luke couldn’t really argue with that, so he followed, stepping up behind his uncle and standing beside him as he rang the doorbell.

They didn’t have to wait long. Almost as if Grandma had been expecting them, she opened the door with a warm smile that instantly faltered upon seeing Mr. D. Her expression turned icy, lips curling in disdain.

“You,” she said, her voice laced with irritation.

“Me,” Mr. D replied flippantly, raising an eyebrow and giving her a mocking once-over.

These two had shared a strange dynamic ever since that first meeting when Luke visited his grandmother. It only got weirder after the arrangement she proposed was completely overturned because his father threw a fit over it.

Still, it was amusing to watch, especially since Luke knew his uncle wouldn't hurt her; he merely expressed his displeasure by becoming even more nonchalant, which only irritated Grandma further.

Scowling, Grandma narrowed her eyes at Mr. D. After a moment's deliberation, she turned away from him purposely, her expression softening as she smiled warmly at Luke.

"Lucas, come, come! I've got some of your favorite snacks ready."

Despite himself, Luke perked up at the mention of snacks and instinctively took a step forward. But Mr. D's hand clamped down on his shoulder, halting him in his tracks. Surprised, Luke glanced back at his uncle, who wore an uncharacteristically serious expression.

"Remember what I said, Luke," he cautioned, a hint of worry seeping through as he hesitated to let go.

Then, with a sudden shift back to his usual sarcasm, Mr. D released his grip and crinkled his nose at Grandma. "Well, since my job appears to be done, I'll leave you in Aparecida's… capable hands."

Without waiting for a response, he turned and marched away.

Clicking her tongue, Grandma grumbled, her eyes narrowing like a hawk's. "Ridiculous man. Where are his manners?" She shook her head, her lips pressed together in disapproval, and waved Luke inside. "Whatever, come on, Lucas, get in here."

Before he could even blink, Grandma had ushered him into the house, a firm hand on his back propelling him toward the kitchen. Soon, he found himself seated at the table, a plate of warm cookies in front of him. The sweet aroma wafted through the air, and he couldn't help but munch contentedly—he had to admit, her cookies were the best—while she settled down across from him.

Giving him a once-over, she clicked her tongue again. "Those people at that supernatural playground of yours do not know how to take care of children, do they?" Her voice dripped with indignation as she gestured at him. "Look at you!"

Admittedly, he wasn't at his best. He looked pale—paler than usual—and the shadows under his eyes were more pronounced. It served as yet another reminder of his sleepless nights over the past few months, the exhaustion clinging to him like a second skin.

This time, it was just a bit more obvious.

Just a little.

“Grandma, I’m fine. Just busy,” Luke said, suppressing a sigh—already well accustomed to her tirades. “I’m twenty now, so I’m not exactly a child anymore.”

There was no way he was going to reveal his actual problems to her; that would just make everything... complicated, to say the least. It was easier to let her think he was just overworking himself—or Mr. D, apparently—which wasn’t exactly a lie, either.

“Bah, you’re still young,” she huffed, a scowl forming. “And your birthday, too! That gringo[1] should’ve let you come home to be with family, not cooped up in that place.”

“I’m the oldest one there, Grandma, and we did see each other before that day. We even had a little celebration, just the two of us,” he replied, a hint of amusement dancing in his eyes as a small smile curled at the corners of his mouth.

She made a face, then dunked her cookie in her drink instead of answering him.

Honestly, he was quite content with the silence. The aroma of food and coffee wrapped around him, a comforting weight that made him forget, if only for a moment. Yet beneath that warmth, he felt... raw, as if he were still piecing himself back together. Being here was soothing, but he still wasn’t quite himself.

After a moment, Grandma finally broke the silence, shifting the topic. “That boy—the one who made the news. It seems he was innocent after all.”

He wondered why she was bringing up this subject after so long, especially since it had been proven that the kid was innocent weeks ago. Maybe she just wanted to talk.

“I *told* you, Grandma. Percy’s a good kid.”

Raising her brows, she sipped her coffee, shooting him an unimpressed glance. Her expression darkened as she continued, “It’s quite scary to think the veil has such a grip on people’s senses that they can be tricked that easily by it.” She set her cup down with a sharp clink, scowling as she added, “To make a country believe a boy was a terrorist—how terrible.”

Luke wisely decided against mentioning that she had thought the same thing at first. Instead, he lightly remarked, “Yeah, the Mist has a way of messing with people’s senses, and it’s always a guess how their minds will interpret it.” He inhaled deeply and exhaled with a sharp huff. “Most of the time, it seems to show them the bad stuff.”

“It’s what I’ve already told you, galego[2],” Grandma straightened, her voice becoming softer. “We are shaped by our beliefs, and the way we see the world is influenced by that.” A melancholic look flickered in her eye as she added, “Your mother understood that better than most.”

Luke paused, his hand frozen mid-air, cookie poised above the plate. Slowly, he set it down. “It’s not everyone who is gifted like she is.”

“*Gifted*,” she snorted, the word dripping with bitterness. “My daughter always *saw* too much. I wonder if that made her think she was invincible.”

Luke pressed his lips together, his gaze dropping to the table. He fiddled with the crumbs of the cookies, counting them absently as he tried to shift his focus away from her words.

“In any case,” she said, snapping her fingers to pull his attention back to her. Her expression softened slightly, revealing a hint of understanding. “For all that your mother *sees* too much, you *see* too little.”

“It’s not my fault, Grandma,” Luke retorted, his tone sulky, though a hint of relief washed over him as the subject shifted back to something more familiar.

“It can’t be helped,” Grandma declared, sipping her coffee. “But it needs to be corrected.” She set her cup down with a clack. “That will have to wait until tomorrow, since your uncle thought it was a bright idea to drop you off here at this hour.”

*Thank God for that,* Luke thought. He really didn’t want to attempt training his *sight* in the dark, especially with other problems demanding his attention—though those would have to wait until his grandma was asleep. She couldn’t know what he was up to.

“Well, there’s always next time,” he offered, though the enthusiasm didn’t quite reach his voice.

But she didn’t say much in response. She looked a little tired, probably from the late hour; old people tended to sleep early, after all. It was strange considering how she drank coffee like it was water, but maybe she became so accustomed to it that it no longer had an effect.

He really should talk to her about her coffee consumption, though.

“Grandma, you really should stop drinking that at this hour. It’s not good for you.”

“And you should mind your own business,” she retorted, raising her brows at him.

“But, Grandma, your health—”

“Remember Mr. Asher?” she interrupted. “I finally got him to stop sitting on the porch every day, but getting him to take care of himself is another matter entirely. Though he is more talkative lately.”

Suppressing a sigh—his grandmother was just too stubborn for her own good—Luke decided to play along. Maybe one day he could change her mind, but today was clearly not that day. Besides, it was hard to feel frustrated when she spoke of Mr. Asher’s improvement; hearing good news about the neighbor warmed his heart a little.

"That's a good thing. Maybe he'll get better soon?"

She took a deep breath, lowering her gaze to her cup before raising it again. “Maybe. He’s been talking more about his daughter lately. I’m not sure if that’s a good sign, but at least something has changed.”

“At least he’s sharing his pain, Grandma. That’s one way to process it—putting words to feelings,” Luke pointed out, recalling how Mr. D had mentioned this to him countless times over the years. Grandma still seemed unconvinced. Unsure how to continue, Luke cleared his throat and asked, “Well, does he seem happy or sad when he talks about her?”

“Both, I think. It’s like he’s unsure how to feel about Abigail,” Grandma replied with a sigh.

*What?*

Luke’s mind screeched to a halt as he processed this. He recognized the name. Furrowing his brows, he averted his gaze and absently reached for a snack, using the moment to let his thoughts race. Grandma’s neighbor was Asher—Asher Barker. The same surname as his missing sister’s. And Mr. Asher was missing a daughter.

This couldn’t be a coincidence. If it was, it would be a cruel trick of the Fates.

Casually, though his heart raced, Luke asked, “His daughter’s name is Abigail?”

His grandmother nodded, taking another sip of her coffee. She stared at him over the rim of her cup, her brows furrowed in puzzlement.

“Pretty name,” he said casually as he poured himself a cup of coffee. Usually, he avoided drinking it in the late afternoon—it made him too hyperactive to sleep and threw off his schedule—but he didn’t care right now.

Nothing could agitate him more than he already was.

“Indeed,” Grandma replied, her voice softening with a smile. “He told me it means ‘my father is joy,’ and his name means happiness. He seemed genuinely pleased when he shared that, saying it made him feel closer to his daughter. But then…” She sighed, her expression turning grim. “He gazed out the window, and his eyes went distant, like he was drifting away again.”

Feeling a weight settle in his stomach, Luke asked, “Does nobody have any idea where she is? No clues, no leads?”

He wasn’t sure why he even bothered to ask. If Mr. D couldn’t track her down, how could mortals? Especially when Abigail could shadow travel and seemed determined to not be found.

He carefully avoided considering the other possibility for why no one had found her yet; he knew he wouldn’t be able to bear it.

“Unfortunately, no. They tried in the beginning, but it was as if she had simply vanished,” Grandma continued, her expression growing somber. She paused, furrowing her brows in thought. “He mentioned that she was special—his special little girl. He said it came from her other parent, but he looked so sad when he spoke about that. I didn’t want to push him further.”

*Special? Other parent?*

The weight of realization settled heavily on Luke; he was certain of it—this was his sister.

“Yeah, it’s better to let him process things at his own pace,” Luke said, trying to sound casual. But inside, he was a jumble of emotions—happy, disappointed, and a swirl of feelings he couldn’t quite keep track of.

His grandmother hummed an agreement, stifling a yawn with her hand. Blinking blearily, she got to her feet, collecting the cups and plates. “Well, it’s late. I’m heading to bed,” she declared. Shooting him a pointed look, she added sternly, “You have the day off today, but tomorrow we’ll train. So don’t sleep in, Lucas.”

As she moved to the sink, the clinking of dishes filled the quiet kitchen. Luke stayed put, a wave of nerves washing over him. He recalled his plan, and while the thought of his sister’s other dad being nearby loomed in his mind, it was quickly overshadowed by a more pressing concern: he had to figure out how to perform the ritual correctly—especially if he wanted to avoid messing it up.

There was one person he knew who understood these topics better than he did, and reaching out to her would be the smart choice before attempting any ritual. But he couldn’t shake the doubt—should he really contact her? Was he even allowed to share this with her? Curling his lips in frustration, he thought sullenly that it probably didn’t matter anymore.

Katherine was living as a mortal, staying away from anything that had to do with demigod life. So, he doubted it would warrant a memory wipe. A twinge of guilt stirred in him; he had kept his memories while she had lost hers, and he had never even tried to tell her the truth—too weighed down by fear.

Still, he desperately needed help, especially since he had no idea where to even start. The thought of opening up about this secret he had carried for so long twisted his insides with unease. But he had to do it; he had to take the leap and trust his friend.

“Good night, Luquinha,” Grandma said, planting a kiss on his head and pulling him back from his thoughts.

“Good night, Grandma…” he replied, watching her walk down the corridor until she vanished from sight. He strained his ears, listening for the soft sound of a door opening and closing.

He lingered for a moment longer, just to be certain, then got to his feet and crept toward his room, pausing every time he heard a strange noise. It was just his nerves playing tricks on him. Once Grandma settled into her room for the night, he knew she wouldn’t be coming out again—at least, not for a while.

Finally, he reached his room and quietly closed the door behind him, trying to keep the noise to a minimum. He made his way to his bag, pulling out his usual prism and a flashlight.

After a moment's hesitation, he contemplated whether to make the call inside or outside, wary of disturbing Grandma. But stepping outside would be even trickier. Taking a deep breath, he

stopped dragging his feet and angled the prism just right, casting a vibrant rainbow across his room.

He admired it for half a second, then rummaged through his pockets for a drachma. Tossing it into the shimmering air, he called out, “Oh Iris, goddess of the rainbow, please accept my offering.” As the coin sank into the mist, he added, “Katherine Clark.”

Soon, he spotted Katherine sitting at a desk beyond the shimmering mist. She looked much the same as ever, though her hair appeared a bit shorter if he squinted and tilted his head just right. Besides that, she wore her typical disinterested expression, paired with a loose long-sleeved shirt and pants—probably to avoid dirt.

When she finally noticed him, Kat made a disgruntled face. But as she took him in, her expression shifted, eyebrows shooting up almost to her hairline. Instead of a greeting, she simply remarked, “You look horrible.”

Scoffing, Luke shot back, “Well, thank you, Kat. I’m fine, thanks for asking. How are you?”

Blinking slowly, her expression flat with judgment, Katherine crossed her arms and ignored him. “Why the call?”

Now, that was the question. How was he supposed to explain this? He had resolved to tell her, but now that he was here, a coldness seeped into his limbs, leaving him suddenly uncertain.

Perhaps he’d been silent for too long, because Kat quipped dryly, “If you just called to admire my face, I’m hanging up.”

“No,” Luke blurted, running a hand through his hair. As if the words were being forced out from his throat, he added, “I… need your help.”

“With what? More Underworld stuff?” she asked tonelessly, boredom seeping into her voice as she barely glanced up from her notes. Leaning back in her seat, she sighed, “I’ve pretty much exhausted everything I knew already.”

“This is… different,” he said, the words sticking in his throat like thorns, still unsure how to begin.

An awkward silence hung between them. Katherine’s expression darkened with irritation; her arms crossed tightly over her chest as she huffed, “If you don’t start talking—”

“A Roman god is after my ass! Okay?” Luke blurted, eyes wide.

Regret hit him instantly, heat creeping up his neck.

*Why the hell did I say it like that?*

“A Roman…?” Kat repeated, her eyes narrowing as she processed the words. Luke held his breath. Slowly, an unnerving glint sparked in her eyes. “A Roman god,” she repeated, this time with a hint of glee.

Luke watched her absorb the information, her expression shifting into something almost excited—her eyes brightening and a hint of a smile creeping at the corners of her lips. A rare sight. Katherine was usually so indifferent to everything, keeping the few things she truly cared about close to her chest.

Still, as much as he appreciated her enthusiasm, he felt a flicker of annoyance that she was more fascinated by the existence of foreign gods than concerned about the fact one was after him.

Luke had to steer the conversation back on track, or they'd get nowhere. He needed to meet Mercury tonight; it was the only window he had before his grandma monopolized his time tomorrow and soon he'd be heading back to Camp. Time was slipping away.

"Yeah, a Roman. I'm pretty sure—he calls me *Graecus* and all that," Luke said, noticing Kat's interest sharpen suddenly.

Her excitement brought a smile to his face, but it also stirred an unsettling feeling in his gut. She should've known about the Romans; she'd been the one to figure it out almost instantly back then. Her current enthusiasm mirrored how she'd reacted in the past, but now Mercury had taken those memories, and everything was new to her again. In a way, she was getting to be happy twice, but that only made him uncomfortable.

"I see," she mused, tapping her chin before moving toward a bookshelf. She paused and turned back to him. "Which god is it?"

Luke hesitated, carefully choosing his words. "My father's counterpart."

Thankfully, she seemed to get it. She paused, her expression turning serious as she echoed, "I see. Your father's counterpart."

No names. He wasn't sure if that would catch Mercury's attention.

She turned back to the bookshelf, stacking books, notebooks, and scattered papers into a growing pile. Luke blinked rapidly, marveling at how much she had apparently researched.

When she returned and dropped the hefty stack onto her desk, an excited gleam sparkled in her eyes. "Well, where do we start?"

"I need to get him to do something," he said, keeping it a bit vague.

Kat furrowed her brows. "Do something?"

Averting his gaze, he added, "The god… might've done something."

Understanding flickered across her face, and she shook her head, her exasperation evident. "What exactly *might* this god have done?"

Luke swallowed hard before continuing, "Just as a thought exercise, of course… suppose this god had shoved part of his essence into a mortal. That mortal lived with it for a while until

they grew tired of it. Then, one day, for reasons no one understands, they almost managed to extract the essence, but… it refused to leave."

"A god shoved his essence into you?" she asked, alarmed, her voice rising.

"Keep it down!" Luke hissed, quickly pausing to listen. There was no movement outside—his grandma was still asleep. "It's just a thought exercise."

Kat rolled her eyes, clearly unconvinced. "So, you want to know how to get the god to take it out?" She added with a sigh, "As a thought exercise, of course."

"Yes." Luke nodded. "Do you think a ritual could work?"

"It could," she replied, stroking her chin as she flipped through her books, notebooks, and papers, scanning them quickly. She lifted her gaze, her expression serious. "But you need to understand that the Romans saw religion very differently from the Greeks. That difference affected the gods, even with all the syncretism."

"What do you mean?" he asked, a hint of hesitation creeping in. He almost regretted his curiosity when he saw the spark of excitement light up her eyes.

Almost.

"You see, the Romans were very practical people," she began, raising a finger as she slipped into lecture mode. "They weren't as concerned with the metaphysical; their focus was more on 'realistic' things, and their gods reflected that."

"So, the Roman gods are pragmatic?"

That aligned with what he'd gathered from scouring the cabins. The only other somewhat useful insight he'd gleaned was Apollo's odd habit of keeping his distance from them. It was strange, but nothing too alarming.

"Maybe, probably, but that's not my point," Katherine replied, flipping open a book to a specific page and holding it up. "At first, they were worshipped as *numina*—somewhat like nature spirits, more akin to powers than beings, without any human form. Then," she turned to the next page, revealing a statue of Mercury holding a sack of coins, "the Etruscans and later the Greeks influenced that."

Furrowing his brows, Luke asked, "And how does that relate to my problem?"

"It means those gods have different origins, which could affect their behavior and personality," she explained, rolling her eyes at him. Then she pursed her lips and sighed. "But they've been heavily syncretized, so it might not matter much. Still, take a look at this." She picked up a sheet from the pile around her and held it up for him to see. "This is from someone in the field, and it's quite relevant to your... *hypothetical* situation."

Luke squinted, trying to decipher the words through the haze of the Iris Message and his dyslexia. It was a challenge, but he thought he grasped the gist of it.

“Something about his origins?” he murmured, squinting harder and willing the letters to stop twisting on the page.

Kat made a small noise, as if she’d just realized something. She set the paper down, reading it with a thoughtful expression as she searched for the right way to explain. For a moment, Luke felt a pang of envy; she didn’t have to struggle with letters flipping around on her. Kat was one of the lucky few. He *wished* he could read something other than Ancient Greek for once in his life without it being a struggle.

After a few seconds, she spoke, jolting him from his thoughts. “So, the god in this hypothetical scenario is descended from minor gods of gain,” she said cautiously. “They were called…”

Katherine hesitated, as if uncertain about saying it aloud. Pressing her lips together, she glanced back at the paper, then grabbed one of her notebooks and tore out a page. Scribbling quickly, she held it up for him to see.

With the larger letters, Luke could finally make it out: *Dei Lucrii.*

“So… what does that mean for me? Just a thought exercise, of course,” he asked, still trying to piece it all together.

“It means,” Kat started, her eyes narrowing as she focused on him, “that this Roman god has origins tied to gods of profit, gain, and trade.”

“So, you’re saying he’s a god of commerce,” Luke said dryly. “I already know that.”

“I’m saying he’s primarily a god of transactions,” Kat corrected, leaning forward, her tone sharper now. “That’s his core identity, and you know how gods are about their true natures.”

Luke pressed his lips together, biting back any retort. She was the expert, not him, and this wasn’t the time for arguments. As he glanced out the window, a jolt of alarm shot through him; it was already dark.

“Look, Kat, I get it,” he said quickly, striving to keep his voice steady despite the growing anxiety simmering in his gut. “What I need to know is what kind of ritual he’d respond to.”

She hesitated for a moment, then grabbed a book, skimming through it with a speed that left Luke struggling to keep up.

“Well, there’s this one,” she said, stopping on a page, her finger tracing the text. “It’s very formal and complete, and it even includes a goat sacrifice. Just make sure to cover your head with a veil—that’s the Roman way, *capite velato,* as they call it.”

“A sacrifice?” Luke echoed, his voice rising slightly. The thought of finding a goat in the middle of a suburban neighborhood at this hour was absurd. What was he supposed to do—*goat hunting*? And how on earth was he supposed to kill it? He’d never done anything like that before. “You want me to just… walk up to someone’s yard and ask if I can borrow a goat?”

“Relax,” Kat remarked, her tone steady as she flipped through more pages. “You can do a symbolic one. Just use meat instead.”

“Meat,” he murmured to himself, his mind racing as he finally caught a glimmer of hope. “I think I can manage that.”

He’d have to swipe some meat from his grandma’s kitchen. As for the head covering… maybe one of the lace scraps she had lying around would do. A hoodie might work—whatever it took, he’d figure it out. He might end up looking like the Virgin Mary, but if that was the custom, he wasn’t about to insult Mercury by skipping it.

“Anything else?”

“An altar, cleansing rituals, incense,” she said, closing the book with a soft thud. “You start by calling on the god of good beginnings, then the goddess of the sacred fire. After that, once your hands are cleansed, you place a hand on the altar and call upon your god.” She paused, her gaze drifting thoughtfully, and then reached for another sheet of paper. “And maybe a title that works well for your situation as an extra precaution…”

Remembering how his father had responded when he invoked his titles, Luke figured it might be worth a shot. Sure, he wasn’t certain it would actually influence Mercury’s behavior, but it didn’t hurt to try.

“I think it’s a good idea.”

Katherine hummed in response, too absorbed in her search to reply. Then she smiled triumphantly and thrust the book toward his direction, her finger firmly pointing to the passage. “This one.”

*Mercurius Bonus.*

“What does *Bonus* mean?” Luke asked, furrowing his brows. He was pretty sure it wasn’t ‘bonus’ as in extra.

“It means ‘good’—or rather, ‘the good’ in this context,” Kat replied, looking rather pleased with herself. Then she stifled a yawn, covering her mouth with her hand. “Now, copy those lines here and memorize them—or at least follow through with them during the ritual.”

Breathing in deeply, Luke complied, carefully setting the prism and flashlight on a surface to keep the rainbow going without interrupting the call. Once that was done, he grabbed a notebook and a spare pen from his backpack—something he’d brought just in case, and now he was grateful he had.

Before long, he was scribbling the steps and prayers as quickly as he could, trying to keep his handwriting legible. His heart raced as he stole glances out the window, anxiety creeping in while Kat held up the book for him to copy from.

Once he finished, he let out a sigh, relief washing over him as a small smile crept onto his face while he glanced at his friend. “Thanks, Kat.”

She returned his smile but quickly shifted to a serious expression. “Good luck, Luke. And for the love of everything that is sacred in this world, please be careful with this Roman.”

Nodding, he blinked, as a hint of mischief sparkled in his eyes. Feeling more confident now that he had a clear direction, Luke began, “This is—”

“A thought exercise, I know,” she cut him off, rolling her eyes. Then, Katherine waved a hand, her gaze sparkling with intensity. “Just make sure to tell me what happens later.”

“I will, Kat.” Luke rolled his eyes, but a grin broke through, causing Kat to scrunch her face in mock disapproval. Yet, the glimmer of amusement in her eyes betrayed her true feelings.

“You’ll be fine,” she stated with confidence before they exchanged farewells. The rainbow of the Iris Message flickered and vanished as she ended the connection on her side.

For a few seconds, Luke stood there, the sheet of instructions clutched in his hand, his gut twisting with nerves once more. Taking a deep breath, he pushed the feeling aside and approached the door, straining to hear any signs that his grandma had woken. Hearing nothing, he grabbed his things and slipped out.

Now, he had a ritual to do, and he hoped it would go well.

*It had to.*

Chapter End Notes

1 - gringo - non-Brazilian

2 - galego - blondie/person with light-colored eyes

So yeah, mystery man is Abigail’s other dad. The poor guy’s been through a lot, but thankfully he has Grandma to keep him company. She gets his pain—at least, some of it. And yeah, gods can have kids with males. They can do whatever they want, after all. It’s not a big deal to them. Like, there’s that myth about Hermes making a child out of his own piss to give to a childless man or something. So yeah, biological kids with males? Nothing new to him, lol.

Also, Kat is back! Kind of. She knows a ton about the Romans—history and all that—and was definitely excited about this reveal. (Luke felt bad about it, though, since she should’ve remembered, considering she was there with him. But he couldn’t say anything without risking things.) Anyway, Mercury’s origins trace back to the Dei Lucrii, minor gods of gain who were more like spirits than full deities. He also got some influence from Turms, the Etruscan god, long before Hermes even came into the picture. So, yeah, the whole Roman-Greek crossover mystery should make a bit more sense now—more obvious, actually. And Mercury the Good (Mercurius Bonus) is one of his titles,

lol. Honestly, he's pretty friendly for a Roman god—curious enough to interact with mortals. Most of the others are worse, aside from Liber Pater.

Anyway, thanks for reading! Comments are always appreciated! And don't worry if you're late to the party—it's all good!

So, what do you think? Will this little ritual finally work and help Luke get rid of the aura after all this time?

# Chapter 44: TLT - Appeasement

Chapter Summary

Mercury is here.

~Last chapter of TLT~

Next update will be next year. Merry Christmas and Happy New Year to all of you! And as a little present, there's a link to an art of Mercury in the end notes.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

As Luke crept around the house, he found himself wondering, not for the first time, if he was doing the right thing—or if he was way in over his head.

But, really, at this point, there was no turning back. He was already here, a crumpled sheet of instructions clutched in his hand, and he'd downed a cup of coffee, leaving him far too wired to use sleepiness as an excuse not to head out.

Sighing, he made his way to the living room, figuring he'd start by searching for something to use as a head covering—seemed like the easier thing to find. He hoped Mercury wouldn't be offended by his improvisation, but he hastily pushed those worries aside.

Thinking about such things *now* wouldn't do him any good.

In the living room, his gaze swept across the room until it settled on a piece of fabric draped over a chair—his grandma must've removed the tablecloth to keep it from getting dirty. Luke picked it up, the delicate lace slipping through his fingers as he unfurled it. It was long enough to drape down his back, thin and airy. Pretty enough for a ritual, he figured, and formal enough to pass for more than just a fancy tablecloth.

Carefully, he wrapped the lace and dropped his backpack onto the sofa, trying to tuck it inside. With that sorted, he seized the moment to check his other supplies, his eyes lingering on the jewelry box he had stowed away with a frown before shifting to a quick inventory: a small altar, resin incense, since it was easier to transport, and even some food—though he doubted he'd need it now, based on his notes.

Thankfully, Luke hadn't had to swipe too many items from his grandma's house; he already had most of what he needed. In fact, the supplies for the Roman ritual were strikingly similar to those he used for the Greek rituals he performed to honor his father. He figured this was largely because ancient worship shared common elements, and, as Katherine had pointed out

in her lectures, many of these traditions had Indo-European roots, making such similarities inevitable.

Aside from the syncretism, of course.

Still, there were a few essentials he had to scavenge. Like the meat, for example.

With a deep breath, he paused to quiet his mind and listen, just in case. For a long moment, he stood there, frozen in place like a scarecrow, but all he heard was the steady rhythm of his own controlled breathing. Reassured, he exhaled softly before creeping toward the kitchen.

The room was dimly lit, with only the moonlight and a few streetlights filtering through the window, making navigation more challenging. But Luke wouldn't dare turn on the lights and risk catching his grandma's attention, so he crept around, heading straight for the freezer. He opened it, a rush of cold air hitting his face as the sudden light made him blink blearily. Pushing through the discomfort, he picked up each meat package, checking it carefully before returning it with a frustrated huff. For what felt like an eternity, he repeated the process, growing increasingly restless, until he finally spotted it in the back.

Relief flooded him as he grabbed it, but then he hesitated, furrowing his brows as the realization hit him—how was he supposed to carry this without making a mess of his bag?

For several agonizing seconds, Luke stood there, a frown creasing his forehead as he frantically searched for a solution, glancing at his bag. Then he recalled his strategy for hiding the earring Mercury had given him, and it was as if a light bulb had flickered to life in his mind.

Immediately, he closed the freezer and set the meat on the countertop alongside his bag, crouching down as he opened the drawers. The wood creaked slightly, despite his carefulness, as he rummaged for plastic bags. Just as he had gathered a couple of bags beside him, he heard the unmistakable sound of a door creaking open.

He froze.

*Damn it,* Luke cursed under his breath for freezing in the first place, quickly crouching lower and sneaking behind the counter.

*Please don't come this way,* he prayed under his breath, his heart racing in his ears, almost drowning out everything else.

He heard the faint sound of her footsteps in the corridor, each creak of the floorboards making him jolt slightly. The kitchen lights remained off, and his grandma didn't appear, but the sound of a door creaking open echoed through the quietness. He held his breath, heart lodged in his throat, straining to catch even the faintest whisper of sound.

*Maybe she went to the bathroom?*

Then came the sound of a door opening again. He listened intently to her footsteps, silently praying she'd head straight to her room. But she paused. For a moment, Luke's mind raced—

*What's she doing?*—before he caught her whisper drifting through the air, "Huh, Lucas is sleeping early."

Another door opened and closed with a soft click. He quickly covered his mouth with his hand, stifling a breath as he carefully rose, peeking over the counter.

The coast was clear.

Still, he lingered there a moment longer, half crouched with muscles tense, straining to catch any hint of movement. When no further sounds came, he finally stood up, relief washing over him, mingled with a rush of adrenaline. Resuming his search, he marched over to where he had left the plastic bags on the floor and slipped the meat into one, layering it with a dozen more to prevent any stains that might ruin his bag.

With his nerves as frayed as they were, even the soft rustle of plastic felt almost deafening.

Mouth drawn tight, Luke tucked the bagged meat into his backpack and retrieved the sheet of instructions he'd copied earlier. His eyes darted over the text, scanning for anything he might have missed. Then, he fixated on a specific section, his lips curling downward in dismay as he read it.

*Wine*. He needed wine, too.

Luke grimaced as he glanced around the kitchen. He couldn't recall ever seeing his grandma drink wine—she preferred cachaça[1], and even that was a rare indulgence. But he couldn't give up now; if he wanted to rid himself of this aura and ease his pain, he had to keep searching. He began rifling through the counters and cabinets, hoping against hope.

Yet, despite his frantic efforts, there was nothing.

Narrowing his eyes, a creeping sense of dread slithered up his spine—where was he going to find wine?

For a fleeting moment, a wave of childish frustration washed over him. Why hadn't Mr. D handed him a bottle? It would have made everything so much simpler. But he quickly dismissed the thought, remembering that the god was under a prohibition punishment—cut off from his wine domain.

It wasn't his uncle's fault that Luke was so unprepared.

Frustrated and feeling a bit desperate, he turned to the fridge. As soon as he opened the door, a deep sigh of relief escaped him, and his shoulders slumped. Nestled inside was a bottle of wine, deep burgundy in color. It was open but nearly full, and that would have to do.

He carefully slid the bottle into his backpack, ensuring it was positioned to minimize any clinking. The thought of that incessant noise rattling his nerves even further was something he was determined to avoid.

Closing the fridge, Luke thought about what else he needed, scanning the kitchen until he tapped his forehead in realization.

He approached the counter and opened a drawer, scrutinizing the knives before finally settling on one that looked sharp enough to cut through frozen meat. He hesitated, unsure where to stash it—walking around in the middle of the night with a knife in hand wasn't exactly the image he wanted to project.

In this neighborhood, everyone knew everyone; word would spread to his grandma in no time. If she caught wind of her grandson sneaking around at night like a hooligan with a knife, he'd surely be the unfortunate recipient of a slipper smack, no doubt about it.

He guessed the disappointment would be even worse than the time he'd pulled a stunt and danced *funk* in front of her—attempting the *quadradinho* to lighten the mood. He stifled a snicker at the memory of her face, so full of disapproval as she watched, silently judging him before slowly reaching for her slipper. That part hadn't been as funny. These days, though, things were different. Antics like that barely fazed her anymore; sometimes, she even joined in—clumsy, sure, but it was always fun.

This, however, was an entirely different situation, and he doubted she'd be as… willing to potentially join in.

As Luke pondered his options, he stepped over to the sink and washed his hands—he needed them clean anyway, and this was as close to a cleansing ritual as he could manage given the time he had.

He could hide it in his pants, but he didn't trust himself not to hurt himself. Walking around with it in hand was out of the question, and stashing it inside his bag risked cutting through the lining and damaging the other supplies.

With a resigned sigh, he recognized he had only one last option.

Searching the counter for the last plastic bags, he wrapped the knife in as many as he could find, just as he had done with the meat. His grandma would undoubtedly have questions if she noticed all the missing bags, but he silently hoped she wouldn't notice at all.

*It's just plastic, for God's sake.*

With everything finally set, Luke took a deep breath, nerves buzzing beneath his skin—*I can't believe I'm really doing this*. He crept to the front door, pausing for a moment to steel himself. Then, he opened it as quietly as possible, slipping out and easing it shut behind him with a soft click.

After locking the door with a quick flick of his fingers, he slipped his hand into his pocket and turned to face the night. As soon as he did, the cold air greeted him, the wind tousling his hair and whispering against his face.

Blinking against the chill, he rubbed his eyes and scanned the empty streets, feeling a weight leave his shoulders as he spotted not a soul in sight. The streetlights flickered on at intervals, casting long shadows across the sidewalks—perfect for keeping him hidden as he sneaked around.

He was good at that.

Seeing no one and with no excuse to turn back, Luke reluctantly walked away from his grandma's house, dragging his feet slightly as he slipped into the shadows. A quick glance at the moon above made him grimace at how late it was, prompting him to quicken his pace.

Still, he had no clue where he was actually supposed to go to pull off this stupid ritual. Glancing around, all he saw were open yards and houses crammed side by side—no privacy to speak of. Definitely not the kind of place to meet up with a god. And he sure as hell wasn't about to let anyone catch him doing a weird ritual with a tablecloth draped over his head, like some kind of saintly maiden.

Really, he hadn't even started yet, and he was already fed up with the whole situation.

Suddenly, an idea flashed through his mind.

*Huh, that might be just what I need,* Luke thought, his frustration easing as the idea took shape.

Set on his plan, he pivoted and headed down a familiar path, quickening his pace. The streets were deserted, and the farther he got from his grandma's house, the less he had to worry about being quiet or subtle—just fast.

It didn't take long for Luke to reach the spot he had in mind. He paused, taking it in—a small, modest park lined with just enough trees to provide some cover. It sat at the junction of several streets, forming a natural crossroads, which felt symbolic for what he had in mind. Besides, he knew the area well from the walks his grandma often dragged him on around the neighborhood, and that familiarity gave him a sliver of comfort, even if it felt useless in this situation.

Breathing deeply to steady his nerves, Luke strolled through the park until he discovered a small, secluded nook nestled behind a cluster of trees, hidden enough to grant him the privacy he needed.

He shrugged off his backpack and started unpacking his supplies, setting up the small altar he'd managed to cram inside. It wasn't much, but it would have to do. He carefully arranged the essentials—incense and a bowl—carefully, though space was tight, forcing him to make do with a cluttered setup that didn't look quite as neat as he'd hoped.

With that done, he grabbed his backpack again and rummaged through it.

Then he hesitated.

Biting his lip, Luke opened the jewelry box, the earrings sparkling like silver stars in the moonlight.

He sucked on his teeth, brows furrowing as hesitation gripped him. But Mr. D's advice echoed in his mind, and he finally gave in. With a reluctant sigh, he took out his current

earrings, placing them gently into the little box he'd prepared. Then, he swapped them for the new, luxurious ones, sliding them into his ears.

His fingers hovered over his ears for a moment before he shook off his stupor, a frown creasing his forehead as he pulled out the tablecloth. He stared at it, wrestling with whether this part was really necessary. Doubt crept in, but a quick glance at his notes dispelled it: *use the veil.* Resigned, he draped the delicate fabric over his head, adjusting it until it fell into place. The lace settled around him like a ceremonial veil, making him feel like some sort of ancient maiden.

Sullenly, he thought that if he had to wear it, he at least hoped to look more ethereally beautiful than ridiculous.

With the altar and himself ready, Luke licked his lips, a buzz of nerves beneath his skin. He glanced up at the sky, the moon hanging high and bright above him, then took a deep breath and steeled himself.

Grabbing the incense, Luke sprinkled it over the altar. Unsure of which scent the Romans preferred, he opted for what he had on hand—his father's favorite, strawberry, along with a more neutral lavender.

It would have to do.

He took a steadying breath and began.

"Janus, keeper of the gate, we ask that you open the way."

He lifted the wine bottle and let a trickle flow onto the altar.

"Vesta, goddess of good sacrifice, we ask you to bless our offerings today and grant them passage to the god of the hour."

Straightening up, Luke felt his heart pounding like a war drum in his ears. He hesitated, hand hovering over the altar, before he found his resolve and placed it down, finally finding his voice.

"We call upon *Mercurius Bonus*, glorious god of exchange, whose praises we sing. Come quickly to join us, for this hour's honors are yours."

A strong wind swept over him, ghosting across the ground and sending a shiver down Luke's spine. An unsettling sensation of being watched crept in, the aura beneath his skin pulsing in rhythm with his racing heart.

Yet, the god did not appear.

It struck Luke as odd—if he had been honoring Hermes, his father would have shown up by now.

He shook off the thought, trying to focus.

Collecting himself, he pulled out the goat meat, slowly peeling away the plastic wrap before placing it into the bowl. He glanced at his notes one more time to confirm everything was in order, then poured wine over the meat.

“Mercurius, we consecrate this offering in the old way, that it might be blessed for your use.”

He reached for the knife, struggling to cut through the half-frozen meat. Deep down, he dearly hoped Mercury wouldn’t be too picky. After some effort, he finally sliced through and poured another splash of wine over the pieces.

“This sacrifice of young goat is offered to you, Mercurius, in honor of the many blessings you bestow. For your glory—”

Suddenly, he sensed a presence looming behind him, sending a shiver down his spine and making the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end. With a slow, deliberate movement, Luke turned his head, his heart pounding like a war drum.

Mercury stood directly behind him, so close that Luke could feel the heat radiating from his body. Craning his neck upward, he suppressed a shiver as he met the god's unblinking, wide-eyed gaze. The glow of the god’s eyes intensified, the brown fading to a shimmering silver as they locked onto Luke's face.

*Unnatural.*

Slowly, Mercury's hand extended toward him, and Luke could only stare, wide-eyed, as it approached. As the god’s fingers neared, Luke braced himself for... something, but what he got was a gentle touch.

Mercury’s fingertips brushed against his cheek, barely grazing the skin, before nudging the head covering to the side.

"You’re wearing them," the god murmured, his voice laced with satisfaction. His fingers brushed lightly over one earring, the touch so feather-light that it sent a shiver down Luke's spine.

Feeling strangely off-balance, Luke brushed aside the sensation and turned his gaze to a spot just off to the side as he began, “Lord Mercury—"

“And you discovered my name as well,” the deity interjected, a thrill of delight in his voice.

Out of the corner of his eye, Luke caught the god smiling, utterly self-satisfied. His annoyance flared, almost outpacing the twist in his gut, and he fought the urge to roll his eyes.

But he wasn’t stupid enough to actually do it, no matter how tempting.

He had to rid himself of the aura first, and the way to do that was by appealing to Mercury’s nature. A god of transactions, of exchange—*Romans were always so practical.*

Luke understood what he needed to do.

"Lord Mercury," he repeated, his voice steady as he turned to face the god directly, refusing to step back. For a fleeting moment, Mercury's eyes glinted silver before returning to their usual brown flecked with green, a smile still dancing on his lips as he regarded Luke expectantly. "I have completed the rituals."

"You did," Mercury agreed, his tone light and affable as his gaze drifted to the altar, scanning over it before flicking back to Luke, a glint that seemed almost amused in it.

“I offered you a goat,” Luke pressed on, his frown deepening as he did his best to ignore the amusement creeping onto the god’s face—this was serious business.

"So you did," Mercury said, his tone smooth, a hint of a smirk curving his lips. He leaned in, closing the space between them, and Luke found himself instinctively leaning back, thrown off by the sudden proximity. Then, with an easy grace, Mercury straightened, the bowl of offerings now in his hands. “An offering, consecrated in the old ways, for *Mercurius Bonus,”* he murmured, eyes flicking down to meet Luke's. “It has pleased me, Lucas. Speak your wish, and I will see it granted.”

Relief flooded his chest, loosening some of the tension as Luke realized he had correctly read the aura's behavior.

But now came the hard part.

Biting his lip, he hesitated, unsure how to phrase his request in a way that wouldn’t offend—or at least would offend less—the god standing before him.

With a tentative voice, he began, choosing his words carefully, “Lord Mercury, you are a god, one of the *Dii Consentes.*” As he spoke, Mercury’s eyes became half-lidded, fixed on Luke with an unwavering gaze that sent a shiver down his spine. Luke swallowed hard and continued, “I’m… just a mortal. While it’s a great honor to host a piece of your essence, I humbly request that we revisit our deal and make it more equitable.”

A heavy silence settled over them.

Slowly, Mercury reached for the half-frozen raw goat meat soaked in wine, lifting it to his mouth. With an effortless motion, he tore off a chunk—far more easily than Luke had managed with a knife—chewing it leisurely while his silver-tinged eyes remained fixed on Luke, unblinking.

Moonlight bathed his features, casting a soft glow that made him appear both ethereal and unsettling at once.

*This is a god.*

Luke quickly averted his gaze to his feet, his heart thundering in his ears.

“You have followed the proper steps, Lucas,” Mercury drawled after a pause, his voice taking on a steely edge. Luke felt a shuffle, and suddenly, a sticky hand lifted his chin, compelling him to meet the god's gaze. “You also called for *Mercurius Bonus*.” His eyes narrowed, and a

wide smile spread across his face, though it lacked warmth, making Luke feel more alert. The god's fingers lightly brushed against his cheek, leaving a trail of stickiness in their wake. "You're a clever mortal, very clever indeed, to offer me all these charming gifts after attempting to rid yourself of my own gift to you."

Crossing his arms behind him, Luke did his best to compose himself. He reminded himself that although the god was clearly displeased, he was also restraining himself from lashing out.

That was a promising sign—*very promising,* in fact.

"Sir," Luke began, his fingers fidgeting nervously. He reminded the god, "Lord Mercury, I have followed the proper protocol."

He thought back to Kat's little talks about how the Romans viewed religion. Their rituals felt more like a quid pro quo—practical, pragmatic, and structured, all geared toward benefiting the state.

And it would work in his favor here too.

"Clever mortal," the god repeated, his eyes gleaming brighter as his grip tightened—*but it isn't painful,* Luke noted in the back of his mind—before he released him. "But you haven't shared your reason, and if an exchange is to be made, it must be clear." With a smile that felt entirely fabricated, Mercury added, "Don't you agree, *Lucas*?"

Internally, Luke sullenly mused that it was quite *funny* this god was imposing such terms now, after having simply taken Luke's energy and shoved his own inside him before. Still, he had to admit it was better than an outright refusal.

*Clown.*

"If it pleases you, sir."

"It would," Mercury replied immediately, towering over him with the bowl of offerings still in his hand. Then he snapped his fingers, and it disappeared.

Luke heard the soft sound of a clack behind him but didn't turn to look, keeping his gaze fixed on the god before him.

With a brief hesitation, he began, "Sir called it getting rid of your gift, but it was more like an accident—"

Whatever he was saying was cut off as he choked on his words.

A sensation settled over his skin, a *warning*.

Despite its attempts to be soft—something Luke noted through the haze of his pain for later inspection—it ignited his already raw nerves, made worse by the aura inside him pulsing in rhythm with it. He clenched his fist in his shirt, coughing and shivering as another wave of pain hit. It grew and grew, until he felt something leak from the corner of his mouth.

Briefly, he wondered if he would collapse, just like that day—

Then the sensation abruptly ceased.

As if submerged underwater, he felt his face cradled with utmost care, yet urgently, fingers roughly brushing the corner of his mouth. Blinking blearily, Luke lifted his gaze to find Mercury staring at him, brows furrowed, eyes fixed intently on him.

Then he spoke.

“You’re in pain. My essence is causing you pain.”

Luke tried to speak, but only a croak escaped, followed by another cough forcing its way up his throat. He shivered from the aftereffects, still feeling as though he’d been skinned alive.

His brow furrowing deeper, Mercury seemed, for lack of a better word, uncertain.

He looked at Luke, his eyes flickering across his face as if he were wrestling with something, then let out a subtle huff.

Suddenly, Luke felt a large hand settle on his chest—he couldn’t help but think how big it was as he felt a bit woozy—and it rested right over his heart. The warmth was pleasant, but with the delirium setting in, he wondered if that was just part of it.

However, that sensation was abruptly interrupted by the feeling of a trickle entering him.

*Pain.*

In a panic, he jerked away, desperate to escape the sensation, but a hand yanked him back, and an arm draped over his back held him tightly in place. Luke thrashed against it, flinching and crying out as he scratched and clawed blindly, hitting whatever was in front of him again and again with his fists.

But it was useless.

The trickle quickly reached the aura inside him, its path like lava coursing through his veins. But unlike Mr. D’s aura that day, this time the foreign essence didn’t react. Soon, the trickle enveloped it, merging seamlessly. As it turned back, it began to crawl out of him, and Luke felt his insides become his own once more.

He was finally free of the aura that had been his companion—his parasite, really—for five long years.

It was a good sensation, yet he felt oddly off-kilter, an emptiness filling the space where it had been. But he was free, and that was what truly mattered.

Gradually, Luke stopped shaking, resting his forehead against something firm as he drew in deep breaths. Though the pain still coursed through his skin, it quickly began to fade.

A slow realization dawned as he absently tracked the hand on his chest, feeling it glide upward over his shirt until it firmly grasped the side of his neck, the thumb pressing gently against his pulse.

As if jolted awake, Luke thought hysterically, *This is a very compromising position.*

Hastily, he pulled away, pushing against the god's chest as a flush crept up his neck. For a brief moment, there was some resistance before he was finally released. Luke backed away, putting as much distance between himself and the god as he could without seeming rude, just trying to maintain his personal space.

Out of the corner of his eye, Luke noticed Mercury remain where he was, tilting his head in Luke's direction as he raised a hand to rest on his chest. He held that pose for a moment before letting his hand drop and smiling with the most genuine amusement Luke had ever seen on the god's face.

For some reason, this annoyed him greatly.

And, for some reason, Mercury's smile widened.

"I granted your wish, *columba*," the god said casually, his tone more self-satisfied than Luke liked. He stepped closer to the altar, picked up the bottle of wine, and inspected it briefly before turning back to Luke. "Now, what do you propose to restore balance to our deal?"

*Columba?* Luke mused, his brows knitting together in confusion, but he quickly brushed it aside.

"I'm not quite certain...?" he replied, observing as Mercury took a sip of the wine, tasting it briefly with narrowed eyes before approaching him, the bottle still in hand.

At ease, the god tutted, a glint in his eyes, then remarked, "This won't do." He handed the bottle to Luke, who took it awkwardly. "There has to be something I can offer, Lucas, in place of the aura to keep our deal balanced."

His mind racing, Luke wondered what the hell he was supposed to propose.

Mercury was acting like it was Luke's prerogative, but that was utter nonsense. Sure, in theory, it was his choice for a substitute since Mercury had 'given' him the aura in the first place, but he knew better. It had to be something the god wanted as well. The silky tone of Mercury's voice was proof enough of his intentions, and judging by that infuriatingly smug expression, he already had an idea in mind.

*Ridículo*$^2$.

"You don't like wine?" the god asked, his voice drawing Luke out of his thoughts. He looked up to find Mercury gazing down at him with intense focus.

Luke glanced at the bottle in his hand, then back at the god, his brows furrowed in confusion.

Mercury raised an eyebrow. "Well?"

“Ah, I can’t drink alcohol until I’m twenty-one,” Luke replied awkwardly, puzzled by the sudden shift in topic.

Mercury tilted his head, his gaze sweeping over Luke from head to toe. “But aren’t you an adult?”

“I am, but eighteen is just the age of majority; twenty-one is the minimum legal drinking age,” Luke explained, feeling incredibly weirded out by the situation.

“Adult at eighteen?” the god mused, furrowing his brows in brief confusion. He then regarded Luke with a contemplative expression. “In Rome, boys enter manhood at fourteen; that’s when we gods claim our children as well.”

“That’s... interesting?” Luke said, uncertain why they were discussing this but willing to play along.

The god appeared genuinely invested in the conversation, which felt strange, but it was what it was.

He couldn’t deny that the idea of Roman gods claiming their children at a set age intrigued him; it felt so different from what he knew. His father’s words echoed in his mind, and Luke remembered sullenly that the Greeks only did so when they happened to recall which children were theirs.

“Indeed,” Mercury agreed, nodding, his eyes glimmering with a hint of curiosity as he took the wine back from Luke’s hands.

Tentatively, Luke asked, “How do you claim your children, sir?”

With a knowing glance in his direction, Mercury smirked, his eyes glinting with a light Luke found hard to trust. “We send signs when the demigod reaches the appropriate age; the augurs interpret them, and then it becomes public knowledge.” He looked quite smug as he added, “Very different from Hermes, as I understand it.”

Freezing, Luke instinctively swept his gaze around the area, nervously scanning the trees and bushes as if his father might materialize at any moment—because usually, that’s how it went.

“Your father won’t be making an appearance, Lucas,” Mercury said, clearly pleased as he swirled his wine. With a vindictive edge, he added, “You called for *me* with a *Roman* ritual, and so I am here.”

*That sounds awfully like he’s drawing a line,* Luke thought, his brows furrowing as he glanced at the god.

Despite himself, he felt curious.

How were the Romans different from the Greeks? What were their ways? And, Luke wondered with a frown, how were they being impacted by the imminent war with Kronos?

Stealing a glance at Mercury, Luke figured he might be able to extract some information from the god, especially since he was his only source now.

He brushed aside the fact that this meant spending more time with Mercury and tried to ignore the feeling that disaster would follow if his father caught wind of it—*that* was a problem for another day.

“You appear rather intrigued by the Romans, Lucas,” Mercury’s voice sliced through his thoughts, a smirk playing at the corners of his lips. Lowering his voice to a smooth, silky tone, he inquired, “Would you like to learn more?”

Luke suddenly felt the nagging impression that he was being led into a trap. But, against his better judgment, he found himself heading straight into it.

*Stupid.*

“If you’re comfortable sharing, sir,” he said, instantly regretting it when Mercury smiled wide, revealing all his teeth in a way that felt distinctly… uncanny.

Approaching him with a languid grace, the god drawled, “Well, I’d be absolutely delighted to.” His voice was smooth, effortlessly charming, as he gestured with the wine bottle, one eye half-lidded in scrutiny. “But while sharing by word of mouth has its charm, it doesn’t quite capture the full complexity or help you *really* understand, does it?” With a sly smile, he extended a hand, lightly grazing the head covering atop Luke’s head. “You participated in my ritual, after all, which means you’ve learned far more than you would simply by listening.”

“Indeed…?”

“This,” Mercury smiled, a victorious glint in his eyes, “is what I offer you, mortal: the opportunity to experience Roman traditions firsthand and discover how we do things.” He cradled Luke’s cheek gently and added, “This will balance our deal.”

Ah, fucking leech.

Now Luke couldn’t even refuse the new deal without it seeming like a direct rejection, and that would definitely upset this man.

But he could still needle—*subtly*.

“What a great honor you’re offering a *Graecus*, Lord Mercury. I wasn’t aware such... exceptions were possible,” he retorted lightly, glancing up at the man through his lashes.

His smile deepening, Mercury brushed his thumb beneath Luke’s eye before stepping back, finally granting him some much-needed space.

“Typically, they aren’t,” he said smoothly, “but you, jewel, are quite different.” Luke frowned, but before he could respond, Mercury pressed on, his eyes sparkling with delight. “If you’re with me, then you can enter New Rome.” Tilting his head in contemplation, he mused, “Now, which one shall I take you to first?”

“Ah, sir,” Luke called out, scrambling for an excuse. “As much as I appreciate the honor, how am I supposed to go while I’m at Camp Half-Blood?”

Mercury paused, his brows arching as if the answer were obvious. “You’re not trapped in your little cage all the time.”

*Damn it.* Why is he so infuriating?

“But my father—”

Scowling, Mercury’s eyes flashed with silver as he retorted, his voice sharp as a blade, sending a shiver down Luke's spine. “Hermes won’t be an issue.”

Unsure, Luke shifted his weight from one foot to the other.

Slowly, Mercury's scowl faded, giving way to his familiar ‘friendly’ expression as he gazed up at the sky, his eyes shimmering in the moonlight like twin moons.

“It’s late, and mortals, from what I understand, need their rest,” he said. Turning to Luke, he added, looking surprisingly—Luke could hardly believe it—sullen, “You need to return to your *materfamilias*, Lucas.”

“You mean my grandma?” Luke asked, watching as the god turned toward the altar and snapped his fingers. In the blink of an eye, the objects vanished, and Luke’s backpack appeared fuller than before.

“A delightful woman; I can see where you get your charm from,” Mercury replied absently, extending his hand until Luke’s backpack came to rest in his palm.

So the entity sniffing around his grandma really was Mercury, something Luke had suspected but now was undeniably confirmed.

*Why?*

But before Luke could prod the god for answers, Mercury handed him his bag and paused, studying him for a long while. Then, with a gentle motion, he removed the head covering from Luke’s head, which promptly vanished, just like the other supplies.

“We’ll see each other soon, Lucas,” the god declared, extending his hand to reveal a card that materialized, much like the one from years ago. He took Luke’s hand and set the card there, saying, “I’ll reach out to you through this, so keep it close.” Leaning in a bit closer, he added with a sly smile, “*Always*.”

Leaning back, Luke felt a bit off-kilter but nodded in response.

Mercury smiled, then brushed his finger lightly over Luke’s cheek one last time before stepping back and beginning to move away.

For a moment, Luke stood there, watching the god’s retreating figure, his hands full with his backpack. He shook off the strange feelings, adjusted the bag on his shoulders, and turned to

head back toward his grandma's house.

A short distance ahead, he couldn't resist glancing back, but there was no one else in sight.

Chapter End Notes

1 - Cachaça - A traditional Brazilian drink made from fermented sugarcane. It's used in the caipirinha too, if anyone has heard of it. It is also very important culturally.

2 - Quadradinho - A dance move where you isolate your hips to draw a square in the air, basically like drawing a square with your butt. It's kinda like twerking, lol, but not exactly the same.

3 - Ridículo - A fool/ridiculous person.

**First of all,** I know some people have their preferences for who they ship Luke with, and I understand that Mercury might not appeal to everyone and might even give some people the ick. But there's a Greek-Roman mystery at the core of this story that's been building for a while, and this is the direction I've decided to take. So yes, Mercury/Luke will be the pairing, and that's it.

That said, here's an unfinished art of Mercury appearing behind Luke: https://ibb.co/g6gNybf

The ritual really shows how the Romans are more formalized than the Greeks, and that little comment about Indo-European influence is completely true. Zeus and Jupiter, for example, both trace back to the same sky-thunder god, which explains why they're similar. Honestly, a lot of the religions in the region were connected, so similarities in rituals (beyond the syncretism) are just natural.

And Luke, all veiled up, doing every step exactly right, only for Mercury to show up like a nightmare-fueled creature? Lol. Still, Luke made a mistake here. He could've pushed harder, and Mercury probably would've caved eventually. The quid pro quo aspect, his nature as a god of commerce (transactions and all that), combined with his soft spot for Luke, would've made it happen. (Something that is also relevant is the 'do ut des', which means 'I give so that you may give'). But hey, the aura is gone now, even if the price is Mercury getting Luke's time to pester him almost every week in exchange.

And yeah, Mercury's still an alien, but he's improving. Kind of. He's actually starting to ask Luke what he likes and is showing curiosity about him. All those books he's been reading, plus Grandma's wisdom, seem to be having an effect. Of course, he still can't resist trying to one-up Hermes—like with the whole "set age for claiming" part. He's just so smug about it, lol.

Liberalia is the festival Mercury was speaking of with the whole "boys enter manhood" thing. It's when they change the toga, and there's a big celebration. But it's not really

adulthood as we think of it now. Back then, adulthood meant actual responsibilities, like becoming a paterfamilias. Liberalia is more like entering young adulthood—they could drink, visit brothels, and things like that.

In any case, thanks for reading! Comments are always appreciated! And it doesn't matter if you're late to the party!

What did you think of this beginning of canon now that it has ended?

# Chapter 45: SoM - Mercuralia

Chapter Summary

> Luke is taken directly to a visit to the zealot soldier camp by Mercury to experience a festival—Mercury's festival. The man is smug, and he knows some things…
>
> ~*Sea of Monsters* has started~

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"A *Graecus* inside New Rome! What a disgrace. And look at him," the statue whirled around, startling Luke, before snapping back to Mercury with a scornful glare. "Not following protocol. At all."

Luke shifted uncomfortably to the side, feeling awkward as Mercury argued with the talking statue. He was still trying to process the shock of being ambushed by a statue that was actually a god when Mercury attempted to pass him through the barriers.

"It's my festival, Terminus. As you well know, I can invite whoever I want," Mercury said, a polite smile on his lips, his eyes curving pleasantly.

A perfectly appropriate response—cordial, pleasant, and *fake*.

After nearly a year of being acquainted with the deity, Luke could tell Mercury was very, *very* irritated. The god's expression didn't falter, but there was a sharpness in his voice, a glint in his eye, and a tension in the air. It was the look he got when things didn't go his way—one Luke was very familiar with.

But on this particular occasion, it seemed like things would work out in Mercury's favor, judging by Terminus's expression—just as they usually did, if Luke was being honest.

*Self-centered, wannabe mafia boss who can't stand to hear a no.*

Terminus seemed to be in a dilemma, judging by that stony expression. Today was Mercuralia, which gave Mercury the final say over anything related to the festival. But this was New Rome, and it was Terminus's duty to guard it—especially against obvious outsiders like Luke.

Not that Luke minded; he hadn't wanted to come in the first place, so he wasn't offended. But, as usual, Mercury had dragged him along, playing the 'deal' card. Since it was Mercuralia, there wasn't really a way to refuse, and the god had been unusually excited about it—which, for Mercury, mostly meant smug.

So here Luke was, unmotivated as hell, wanting to go home, and tense as ever, standing in the heart of a territory filled with a bunch of little soldier psychos who'd be more than happy to skewer him if they even half-noticed he was a Greek demigod.

*Marvelous.*

Luke heard Terminus huff and turned to focus on the god, who shot a glance at Mercury, now wearing a triumphant smile. With a heavy sigh, Terminus grumbled, giving Luke a sidelong look. "Lord Mercury, I will permit this clear bending of the rules since it's your festival, and, as you've said, you have full authority over how it's celebrated. But understand, I have my own duty to uphold."

"Of course, Terminus," Mercury replied, walking past the statue and stopping to pat Terminus on the shoulder—though it was really just a shoulder since there were no arms at all. This made Luke wonder how the god dealt with invaders. "I would never endanger New Rome and its people, nor would I betray it. I understand that completely."

His expression shifted to something more menacing as his grip tightened until Luke heard a crack and saw Terminus's face twist in pain. "But remember: I'm one of the *Dii Consentes*, and today is *my* festival."

For a moment, Terminus didn't answer, and the sound of cracking grew louder before the god finally spoke. His voice revealed no hint of the pain he was in; he remained completely steady and composed as he said, "I will keep that in mind for future endeavors, Lord Mercurius."

Dropping his hand, Mercury's smile was easy, as if nothing had happened. "I'm glad, my old friend," he replied, before turning to Luke with a bright, almost teasing cheer. "Come on, Lucas! There are so many things I want to show you—I'm sure you'll love them."

Hesitating for half a second, Luke followed the god, stealing a wary glance at Terminus. The other god ignored him, his expression as stony as the material he was made of. Yet, he was clearly paying attention; the barriers protecting the heart of Rome lifted for a moment, letting Luke pass without feeling like he was trying to walk through a wall bristling with spikes.

Still, the barrier loomed, almost as if it were watching him, not friendly at all—more like a creature poised to strike at the slightest misstep. A chill crept up Luke's spine as he realized just how easily Terminus could crush him if he wanted. The only thing keeping him safe was Mercury's presence and Terminus' reluctance to risk incurring his wrath.

Suppressing a shiver, Luke rubbed his arms, trying to chase away the goosebumps as he finally stepped into Roman territory. But there was no time to dwell on the discomfort; Mercury had already started weaving through a crowd gathered for some reason, like there was a flash sale at the supermarket, and Luke had to quicken his pace to keep up.

Rushing after the god, Luke struggled to navigate through the crowd of people around him. As he squeezed between two individuals, he earned a muttered curse in Latin for his trouble. Shooting a sullen glance ahead, he noticed that, unlike him, Mercury was gliding through the crowd with effortless grace, as if it parted just for him.

*Probably using some kind of divine trick,* Luke thought sourly, which felt incredibly unfair—especially since Mercury wasn't offering him any help, even though he was the one who had dragged him into this in the first place.

Shaking off his frustration—it wouldn't help, even if silently cursing the god felt a bit satisfying—Luke pressed on, jostling against shoulders as he navigated the crowd. He caught a few angry shouts in Latin behind him and even found himself shoving a couple of people aside, which made him feel bad for a fleeting second, until he had to hurry forward again, losing sight of Mercury for a moment.

Eventually—though later than he would have liked—Luke finally caught up to Mercury, who stood at the front of a line of people. Strangely, none of them seemed to notice the god for who he truly was, likely thanks to some kind of divine magic.

Mercury was standing right in front of a simple well, just beside one of the gates that marked the limits of the city. The gate itself was composed of large stone blocks, featuring an arched passageway flanked by sturdy walls on either side. Though there were a few decorative touches like trees and plants, the overall design struck Luke as utilitarian and, frankly, a bit… boring.

He wasn't sure what he had expected, but it felt like it should have been more impressive.

"Lucas," the god called, his voice cutting through the noise without him even glancing back. With a casual gesture, Mercury beckoned him to come closer to the well.

Sighing, Luke complied, coming to a halt in front of Mercury and staring, expecting some sort of direction. Instead, the god simply fixed him with an intense, silent gaze, waiting.

Realizing that Mercury wasn't going to give him any hints about what he was supposed to do, Luke felt a wave of discomfort wash over him. He stole a quick glance over his shoulder and noticed a line of impatient Romans behind him, their eyes fixed on him expectantly. Each of them clutched something—food, notebooks, even handmade crafts like little statues—but none seemed to be engaging in whatever Mercury wanted him to do.

Unsure, Luke shifted awkwardly on his feet, the weight of their gazes pressing down on him as he struggled to figure out how to proceed without embarrassing himself.

"Well?" Mercury's voice cut through Luke's spiral of thoughts, snapping him back to the moment. He turned to face the god, who regarded him with a raised eyebrow before glancing at the well and then back at him expectantly.

Feeling awkward, Luke glanced at the well and then returned his gaze to Mercury, fidgeting with his fingers as they entered a silent staring contest.

After a beat of awkward silence, Mercury snapped his fingers, a look of sudden realization lighting up his face. Before Luke could say a word, the god sidestepped him and drew a bucket of water from the well. Whirling back to face Luke, he plunged his hand into the bucket, and before Luke had a chance to react, water enthusiastically sprinkled over his head.

Blinking rapidly, Luke looked up to find Mercury sporting a self-satisfied smirk. The god winked at him and playfully poked him in the forehead. Almost instantly, a warm sensation enveloped him, the familiar touch of Mercury's aura resting against his skin. For a moment, he glowed silver before the light faded, but in the sunlight, a faint shimmer still clung to him.

"What's this?" he asked, rubbing his arms as Mercury wasted no time, placing a guiding hand on his back and steering him away from the well and into the heart of the city.

"This is my festival, Lucas," the god replied, his tone annoyingly matter-of-fact, a smirk dancing at the corners of his lips.

Most importantly, it didn't really explain anything.

It was clear this was some kind of blessing, but Luke had no idea what it actually did, since Mercury wasn't offering any explanations. As for the festival, he still didn't quite understand it. Sure, it was dedicated to Mercury, but it seemed different from the Hermaea, the ancient celebration honoring his father's gymnastic aspect—*if* he remembered correctly.

Not that he cared to find out; it felt a bit ironic, considering who his patron was. But then again, unlike Camp Jupiter, Camp Half-Blood didn't really hold festivals, so he could use that as an excuse.

*Probably.*

Incapable of controlling his expression, Luke shot Mercury a disparaging look, prompting the god to laugh. The sound startled him for a moment, but as Luke's annoyance began to fade, it gave way to curiosity—he had never seen the god genuinely… happy before. Watching him, Luke noticed how the laughter softened Mercury's sharp features, easing the angles of his face and revealing a warmth that felt authentic: real warmth, not the cordial, *fake* facade the deity typically wore.

Feeling inexplicably embarrassed, Luke averted his gaze and focused on anything but the god, who either didn't notice or had the decency to pretend he didn't. *Good*. If Mercury knew what was good for him, he'd keep it up. However, Luke had to admit he wasn't really capable of doing much against Mercury, *but* at least the sentiment was there.

Soon, though, he redirected his thoughts as he began to take in his surroundings.

All around them, the houses grew denser by the minute. As a Greek demigod, Luke found some aspects familiar, yet certain differences caught him off guard. The abundance of arches and the concrete material stood out, though he noticed bricks incorporated as well. The houses appeared larger overall, especially farther from the center, where they resembled villas—spacious and grand, complete with facades and columns, even featuring marble. In summary, these were clearly the homes of the wealthy.

Closer to the center, Luke spotted more modest houses, though they were still quite large. Their plain facades were made of white brick, topped with red-tiled roofs, and most had wooden doors. A hint of excitement sparked in his heart as he observed that some even

featured intricate carvings. Additionally, he noticed other structures resembling apartment buildings but distinctly Roman in style.

It was as if someone had modernized the ancient Romans cities just a bit, and the result was truly inspiring to see.

“Marvelous, isn’t it?” Mercury remarked, his expression brimming with pride, though a suspicious glint danced in his eyes as he scanned Luke’s face.

“It’s pretty,” Luke replied, casting a sidelong glance at the god before returning his attention to the city.

It wasn’t every day one stepped into a hidden Roman city, especially one filled with demigods who wouldn’t hesitate to have his hide if they discovered he was Greek.

“Of course it is,” the god replied smugly, nudging Luke forward until they reached the heart of what appeared to be a bustling commercial district.

The street stretched wide, buzzing with the sounds of chatter and haggling—grumbling elders mixed with joyful families keeping watch over small children who played freely, blissfully unaware of the monsters lurking beyond the walls. Here, within this sanctuary, they had no need to fear. Honestly, the scene startled him, even though he *knew* the Romans lived longer, thanks to the advantages of a real, protected city. Still, it felt strange to see demigods and legacies older than him, especially since he was used to being the oldest at Camp Half-Blood.

Yet, despite the oddity of it all, the feeling wasn’t entirely unpleasant.

On either side of the street, shops and stalls lined up, many housed in buildings reminiscent of those he had noticed earlier but with some distinct differences, most notably their open fronts. They sold an array of goods. As he whipped his head from side to side, Luke took in the bustling cafes, vibrant markets, a cozy bookstore, and even spotted a woman he recognized from the well earlier, proudly displaying the same handmade craft from before at the front of her shop for some reason.

“Which one do you want to visit first?” Mercury asked, leaning down slightly to get a better look at Luke’s face. The man’s hand lingered on his back, a detail that made Luke want to squirm.

Brushing aside his discomfort, Luke clasped his hands in front of him and glanced at the market. Furrowing his brows, he turned back to Mercury. “I don’t have any…” He hesitated, lowering his voice so only the god could hear. “…Roman money.”

Mercury huffed and straightened up, his brows knitting together and a distinct frown forming on his lips. “You won’t have to pay for anything,” he retorted firmly, clearly annoyed.

“But—”

“You won’t have to pay for anything,” the god reiterated, his tone leaving no room for argument. A glimmer flashed in his eyes as he fixed his gaze on Luke, his expression

unreadable—though Luke had learned to recognize it as a sign of his displeasure. Then, with a smile that completely transformed his demeanor, he added, “Come, Lucas, choose one.”

Clenching the hem of his shirt, Luke glanced at Mercury and sighed, realizing the god wasn’t going to budge. With a glare, he muttered under his breath, but apparently the god heard him, judging by that infuriatingly amused expression on his face.

“If you insist,” Luke sighed once again, resigned.

What had he expected? Once Mercury set his mind on something, he rarely changed it. The most he would do was adjust his approach, but the end goal always remained the same.

With that in mind, Luke began to scan the marketplace, acutely aware of Mercury's gaze on his profile the entire time. The weight of the god's hand on his back was equally distracting, but he did his best to concentrate.

A few things caught his eye, but the most prominent was a bookstore tucked away in a corner, surprisingly quiet. That lack of crowd was one reason he was drawn to it, but mostly, he was just curious.

Were the books in Latin, too? If not, maybe he’d find more information about the Roman gods here, which, if he was being honest, was his primary motive.

For all the cultural insights and festivals Mercury had shared with him, Luke still recognized that the god didn't fully understand how mortals thought most of the time. He also wanted to learn more about the Roman pantheon, but he wouldn’t dare ask Mercury about it; the god would likely jump at the chance to brag, which he did more than enough already. So, it had to come from mortal sources. Yet, Luke wasn’t naive enough to think those would be entirely impartial—the Roman demigods probably had their own biases, possibly worse than the Greeks, given their *‘Rome above all’* mentality.

Honestly, it was better to seek this information elsewhere, and Katherine would be his best bet; she was knowledgeable about this kind of stuff.

But he was already here, so it wouldn’t hurt to check, and despite himself, he *was* curious.

“That one,” he finally said, pointing a finger at the bookstore.

Mercury followed the direction of Luke’s finger, tilting his head as he took in the sight of the bookstore. With a thoughtful hum, he asked, "Do you enjoy reading?"

“I guess, when I can actually read them,” Luke answered absently, navigating through the crowd with greater ease now that he wasn’t rushing after a *certain* someone and could move at his own pace.

Mercury hummed again but didn’t pry further, which was a relief for Luke. The god had a knack for being annoyingly inquisitive with his endless questions, but at least he showed an interest in mortals. Better to have a god who cared—albeit clumsily—than one who simply trampled over humans without a second thought. To be fair, Mercury sometimes did that too,

and he never seemed to understand why Luke found it frustrating. After all, Luke was smart enough not to voice his annoyance; he wasn't stupid.

Still, Mercury had a knack for sensing his stronger emotions, likely due to the piece of his essence the god still possessed. Even so, he wasn't entirely convinced that Mercury was being entirely truthful about that 'stronger emotions' comment.

Either way, it could get pretty irritating.

Over the past year, Luke had been stuck dealing with Mercury almost every weekend. Skipping wasn't really an option—the god would get irritable, and once, he'd even made a nuisance out of himself outside Camp Half-Blood's barriers, much to Mr. D's annoyance. Luke's uncle had made some snide comment about keeping his 'Roman dog' on a leash, like that was something Luke could actually do.

At first, Luke had been pretty tense, but over time, that fear dulled into a kind of tired, weary annoyance. Mercury hadn't hurt him, and, to his credit, he'd tried to be more respectful than he'd been during their first encounter. Sure, some of his behavior still felt off-putting, even unsettling at times, but Luke had gotten used to it. In his own strange way, the god seemed to be making an effort—especially early on, when their meetings were held in ordinary mortal places, though those spots always tended to be well beyond anything Luke could afford.

The god had even taken Luke to Rome once, and although he felt a bit uncomfortable, he was grateful for the chance to see it. In fact, he quite enjoyed the trip—a lot, if he was being honest.

However, this was the first time Luke was stepping into New Rome, and it left him on edge. Still, after seeing how easily Mercury handled Terminus, he felt a bit more at ease having him around.

*Mercury makes for a good shield,* Luke thought, nodding to himself as he finally maneuvered through the crowd and reached the bookstore.

Luke paused in front of the bookstore and glanced over his shoulder, only to realize that Mercury had vanished. Instantly, he regretted what he'd just thought about the god being a good shield. Here he was, in the middle of unfamiliar—possibly hostile—territory, and the one bit of protection he had had wandered off, leaving him to fend for himself.

*Clown.*

For a moment, he hesitated, a flicker of doubt gnawing at him. Then he mentally shrugged it off with a resolute *fuck it* and stepped inside. He was already here, halfway across the country from anything familiar, and running wasn't exactly an option. Might as well see what the bookstore had to offer.

The bookstore was... ordinary. Nothing grand or impressive, just a cozy space with tall, packed bookshelves lining the room. The walls, in warm, wood-like tones, added to the atmosphere—though Luke had his doubts about whether they were actually wood or just cleverly painted to look that way. The floor was dotted with rugs and armchairs, inviting

readers to settle in, and a few fake plants were scattered around to complete the look. But there were subtle Roman touches. Luke's gaze drifted to a small shelf adorned with a figure of Mercury's symbol, and in a corner, a little statue of the god stood, clutching a sack of coins.

There were also a few figures of Minerva, though they weren't as prominently displayed.

*Maybe due to Mercuralia?*

At the front, behind the counter, a guy about Luke's age slouched in his chair, radiating boredom. He cast Luke a cursory glance, gave him a quick once-over, then pursed his lips in disdain before returning to whatever he'd been doing—which appeared to be nothing of importance, judging by the covers of the magazines piled haphazardly on the counter.

*Quite the attentive employee,* Luke thought sarcastically, shooting the guy a fleeting look that went unnoticed.

Still, he wasn't exactly displeased by the guy's lack of interest; in fact, it was a relief. It meant he could browse as much as he wanted without someone hovering over his shoulder—a risk that could easily blow his cover. He didn't read Latin, and he still wasn't sure if the books here were in English, but based on his experience at Camp Half-Blood, he doubted it.

And there was still the issue of the money...

Whatever. He could just flip through them here instead of buying them.

Deciding to go in, Luke began browsing the books while keeping an eye on the guy, who didn't bother to look up. This indifference tempted Luke to swipe something just to test the limits, but he reminded himself that this was Roman territory, and he was a guest. Resisting the urge was the wiser choice. Besides, he wasn't stupid, nor did he lack self-control.

As he wandered through the shelves, a few books caught his eye. However, every time he picked one up, he discovered it was written in Latin, a language he couldn't read. The letters seemed to dance off the page—his dyslexia was better than that of some demigods, but it still made reading a challenge. The text often felt like gibberish to him, but he could guess the meaning of a few words based on his knowledge of Portuguese. Still, those were just educated guesses and could easily be inaccurate.

Despite himself, Luke felt a wave of disappointment rise in his chest, even though he knew it was a long shot. Shaking his head, he turned his attention to the illustrations in the books, trying to infer something from them. Suddenly, the chime of the doorbell echoed through the room as someone else walked in.

He turned to look, and was instantly taken aback by what he saw.

*What the hell? Did this man just steal a child?*

There, striding toward him, was Mercury, cradling a baby—probably around one year old, though Luke wasn't particularly good at estimating ages. The toddler was dressed in a vibrant

pink goat onesie that was almost blinding, and her brown, wavy hair was styled in twin pigtails. It was undeniably adorable, if Luke was being honest. Also, the little girl seemed completely at ease, her head swiveling around as she clapped her hands, clearly entertained by everything around her, including Mercury.

She even patted the god's cheek with a chubby hand—clumsily, as babies do—but Mercury didn't seem to mind.

Luke's confusion only deepened as the god casually deposited the baby into his arms, swiping the book from his hands with a passing glance at it. Luke frowned, adjusting his hold awkwardly as he looked down at the girl. She stared at him, wide-eyed and uncertain, before her face lit up with a gummy smile that, despite his best efforts, chipped away at his defenses—he could admit that much.

She clapped her hands, giggling like she'd won something, and Luke felt his heart soften just a little more, no matter how hard he tried to ignore it.

Ignoring her little pats on his cheek, Luke turned to Mercury, who was watching with an oddly serious expression. Luke shifted, feeling a bit self-conscious under the god's gaze, and cleared his throat, running a hand over the baby's soft hair. "So, what's with the baby?"

"This is the daughter of my daughter," Mercury replied, his gaze shifting to the little girl, his expression softening slightly.

*Why doesn't this crazy man just say she's his granddaughter? Maybe he doesn't want to feel old,* Luke thought, furrowing his brows. *But he is, even if he doesn't look it.* He shook off the thought and turned his attention back to the baby.

"Well, she's cute," Luke said, gently bouncing her and smiling when she giggled.

"She looks like me," Mercury remarked out of the blue. Luke stopped, the baby whining in protest, and turned to the god, bewildered.

But Mercury simply stared back, calm and unbothered.

A bit taken aback, Luke shifted his gaze between the two of them. Wavy dark brown hair, brown eyes—though Mercury's had green flecks while the toddler's didn't—and they shared the same eye shape, nose, and those elegant, high cheekbones. Now that he was really looking, he couldn't deny that the baby was a miniature version of Mercury—just female and tinier, but still incredibly cute. After all, the god wasn't unattractive, so it made sense that his brood would be good-looking; in this case, downright adorable.

As he watched her, the girl kept staring at Luke, sucking on her fist. The sight was so endearing that, without really thinking, he smiled warmly and gently ran his hand through her soft hair again.

"Do you like children?" Mercury asked suddenly, his expression carefully neutral.

“I… suppose I do, yes,” Luke replied, tilting his head slightly as he studied the god, trying to decipher something in his demeanor.

However, Mercury’s expression gave away nothing about what he was really thinking.

“I see,” the god mused to himself, narrowing his eyes slightly.

That expression quickly morphed into his typical smug smile as he turned and marched over to his statue. He picked it up, gazing at it for a moment before it began to glow silver. Moments later, the entire place illuminated, startling the guy behind the counter and causing him to look around in confusion. He gaped like a fish when he spotted Mercury, but before he could say anything, the god returned to Luke, placed a hand on his back once more, and they stepped outside the bookstore.

Once outside, Luke glanced back, but he didn’t have a chance to ask about it; the god swiftly ushered him away to explore the rest of the marketplace. Still, Luke suspected the blessing had something to do with the festival. With everyone emphasizing that Mercury was a god of commerce, it was likely some sort of merchant ritual or tradition.

“Now, what else do you want to visit?” Mercury asked, guiding him through the crowd. This time, with the god by his side, navigating was much easier—why Mercury hadn’t done that from the start was a mystery to Luke.

Luke made a face, then sighed, the baby in his arms cooing up at him.

“Maybe something to eat while I check out the other things?” he suggested.

Mercury hummed and simply gestured for Luke to pick something, prompting another sigh of exasperation from him. Still, he complied, though reluctantly—if he was honest, he just wanted to go home. But he had a nagging feeling that wish was still a long way off.

Picking a random food stall, one selling delicious-looking hamburgers, Luke made his way over, still trying to make sense of everything.

In the year they had been forced to coexist, Mercury had always done things on his own terms, and this situation was no exception. Not even when Luke told Mr. D about the new arrangement did his uncle’s fury faze the Roman; in fact, Mercury seemed to find it amusing when they met again. Mr. D had even accompanied Luke to confront the god, demanding an end to what he called ‘blatant shamelessness.’

But, in the end, the arrangement stayed.

Mercury had a way with words, and he’d argued—far too convincingly—that this wasn’t a matter under Greek jurisdiction. Smiling with all his teeth and a spark in his eye, he’d even pointed out how Luke already worshipped another god, so why the fuss now? It wasn’t worship anyway, just meetings—surely that was less important.

Mr. D hadn’t bought it. He’d looked furious, completely unconvinced, and made his displeasure very clear—every day since. But there wasn’t much he could do without dragging

in the Greek side, and that was the last thing Luke wanted. Thankfully, his uncle respected that. Not without grumbling, of course—about Romans, overgrown roosters, and anything else that came to mind.

In the end, though, everyone agreed that Hermes shouldn't learn about this, or things would spiral out of control. Both gods seemed to know something Luke didn't, especially since Mercury was oddly confident he could keep the meetings hidden from Luke's father.

How he planned to pull that off was the question of the year in Luke's mind, but the god had said no more, so that was that, and Luke simply complied.

And he had to admit it seemed to be working, considering his father hadn't stormed into Camp yet after all this time.

At the stall, Luke finally grabbed his food and noticed a small statue of Mercury's symbol on display. As he brought the hamburger to his mouth, he deftly dodged the girl's grabby hands —he really needed to ask her name; calling her 'the baby' wouldn't do. Just like before, Mercury picked up the symbol and performed his blessing, then swiftly ushered Luke away, moving faster than anyone nearby could react.

This time, with the streets busier, they managed to slip by largely unnoticed.

As they walked, Luke shot a sidelong glance at the god, pulling his food out of the baby's reach. He felt he was beginning to notice a pattern. Deciding to put it to the test, he turned toward a stall selling hot dogs—not the loaded *dogão* he knew back in Brazil, which was practically a full meal in itself with all the extra toppings—but he was determined to see if his theory held true.

Once there, Mercury repeated the blessing ritual just as he had at the earlier stalls. Realizing this, Luke moved on to another food stand, then another, and each time, the same pattern played out.

Now, with his hands full of food and a baby, Luke concluded that Mercury was blessing only the establishments where he chose to make a purchase. Unsure how to process this revelation, he pushed aside the odd feeling and resolved to make an effort to eat everything he had bought.

As he focused on devouring his ice cream after finishing both the hamburger and the hot dog, Mercury's teasing voice broke through. "How can you be this small and eat this much?" The god leaned down, locking eyes with Luke, a playful smirk on his lips. "Where does it all go?" he asked, his gaze appraising. "From what I gather, mortals aren't meant to indulge without limits—unless, of course, you enjoy a little discomfort."

Scowling, Luke huffed in reply, "I'm average-sized, not small."

Mercury straightened to his full height, at least a head taller than Luke, and looked down at him pointedly.

Luke stared up for a moment, then clicked his tongue and turned away, refusing to meet the god's gaze. “You’re just unfairly tall, so it doesn’t count,” he muttered. With a determined expression, he added, “I’m of average height. Most men are my height.”

“If you say so, *columba*,” Mercury replied, his voice laced with amusement. Luke shot him an annoyed look, but it only made the god’s grin grow wider.

Still smiling—an expression that felt surprisingly sincere—Mercury rested a hand on the back of Luke’s neck. Luke tensed, his shoulders twitching slightly, but the god's touch remained gentle as he guided him away from the marketplace and into a quieter residential area. Luke’s discomfort melted into curiosity, and he began to glance around, observing the surroundings as they walked, hardly aware of Mercury's guiding hand.

Soon, they arrived at a sprawling complex of buildings, surprisingly empty—likely due to the festival. A tall, locked fence encircled the property, stretching across the entire block and clearly distinguishing it from the surrounding structures. Inside, Luke spotted several buildings he assumed were classrooms and dorms. The dorms were set apart from the others, the only area directly connected to the street without any fencing. Though he thought that section should be more secure, he reminded himself that this was just his Brazilian sensibilities speaking. He also spotted what he guessed was a dining pavilion for the students, all topped with slanted red tiles like those on the other houses in the city.

At the center stood a striking building featuring a gilded dome and a bell tower that immediately captured his attention. The structure was adorned with elegant arches crafted from pristine white marble, reminiscent of the luxurious houses he had seen earlier. It was clear that a significant amount of money had been invested in this place, especially given the pricey materials and design.

“Welcome to New Rome University,” Mercury announced, sweeping his hand toward the buildings. As he did, the fences unlocked and swung open as if inviting them in.

Casting a cautious glance at the god, Luke asked, “Are you really sure we can go in? Isn’t this a bit like breaking and entering?” As he gently bounced the fussy girl in his arms, he seized the moment to add, “And what’s her name, by the way?”

Mercury raised an eyebrow, casting a bemused look down at Luke. “I’m one of the *Dii Consentes,* Lucas. I can go wherever I please.” Leaning in closer, he gently ran his fingers through the child’s chubby cheeks, his smile softening as the girl’s gummy grin appeared, her delighted giggles echoing around them. “Her name is Lucretia, and she’s bound to prosper.”

Upon hearing her name, the baby erupted into giggles, clapping her hands before reaching out with grabby fingers toward Mercury. The god paused, momentarily stiffening in uncertainty. However, Luke quickly made the call for him, gently depositing the god’s granddaughter back into his arms—after all, since Mercury had done the same to him, it felt only right to return the *favor*.

Karma, as people liked to say.

For a brief moment, Mercury held Lucretia in his arms, looking both bemused and amused. He quickly composed himself, shifting her to one arm while using the other to steer Luke inside.

Once they stepped into the university, Luke came to a halt, marveling at the beautiful interior. Sunlight flooded through the windows, illuminating the halls and rooms in a warm, inviting glow. The walls were adorned with intricate mosaic tiles, and he moved closer to admire them, aware of Mercury following behind him at a leisurely pace. The tiles depicted what appeared to be famous Romans from ages past, alongside mythical creatures he'd never encountered—and hoped never to, given their menacing looks; his life was complicated enough without adding more monsters to the mix. There were even vibrant images of deities, each one crafted with remarkable detail and color.

As he ran his finger over the tiles, Luke marveled at the craftsmanship, the intricate details, and the harmonious arrangement. Surprisingly, the artwork didn't overwhelm the space; instead, it created a tranquil atmosphere—perfect for a place of study where calm was essential to avoid distractions.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Mercury remarked, glancing at Luke instead of the wall, which wasn't particularly surprising. After all, he was a Roman god; he likely knew these walls intimately and could recreate them with his eyes closed.

"Very," Luke answered honestly.

Mercury smiled slightly and beckoned Luke to follow him to a spot further along the wall, more towards the center of the hall.

"This one honors me." He pointed at the wall with a hint of pride.

The mosaic showed Mercury in mid-leap, as if caught running on air. He wore a white tunic that draped down to his waist, leaving his torso bare, and embroidered in rich purple and silver. Over it, he wore a deep purple toga, also intricately stitched with silver. Unlike the more familiar images of Hermes in a simple traveler's cap, Mercury had a winged helmet, with the wings sweeping across his eyes and obscuring his features. In one hand, he held a sack of gold, ever-present, while the other grasped the caduceus, its twin serpents coiling up the staff.

"You look different here," Luke remarked, tracing a finger over the winged helmet in the mosaic. He could sense Mercury standing close behind him, and after a moment, he glanced back, giving the god a quick once-over. Without really thinking, he added, "Tu tá mais espilicute nesses tempos modernos.[1]"

The words left his lips before he could stop them, and regret hit instantly. What was he thinking? Speaking to a god like that—as if Mercury were just another friend? Sure, it was easy to forget the distinction sometimes, given how much time they'd spent together, but still. *A god.*

Worse, the comment. He practically accused Mercury of showing off. Maybe, just maybe, the Portuguese would work to his advantage. The god might not understand—he hoped.

Mercury looked a bit puzzled, furrowing his brows as he slowly repeated what Luke had just said.

After a brief pause, a glimmer of understanding sparked in his eyes, and he broke into an amused smile. “I suppose I’m just a bit more focused on my business these days,” he replied, a teasing edge to his voice, “which means I dress for that role rather than just as a herald.”

*Oh God.* He understood what he had said. Mercury was a god of language too; how could Luke have forgotten that crucial detail?

Heat rushed to Luke's cheeks as he ran a hand through his hair, glancing at a random spot away from the god and pretending to fix his hairstyle.

“I see, that makes sense, I suppose. Today is more about suits and all that,” he replied, trying to sound nonchalant.

“Are you being…” The god rolled the word on his tongue slowly, still tinged with an accent that was oddly endearing. “…*espilicute?*”

Surprised, Luke turned to face the god, who was tilting his head in curiosity, just like the baby in his arms. The little girl occasionally glanced up, trying to mimic Mercury's expression. Unable to contain himself, a laugh escaped his lips at both the sight and what he had just heard.

It was so absurd that he couldn’t help it.

“Yeah, I suppose I am,” he answered, a smile creeping onto his face.

The god paused, regarding him with an intensity that made Luke shift slightly under his gaze.

After a beat, he hummed lightly and asked, guiding Luke further into the hall and toward the classroom wing of the university, “Don’t you have any more new words to teach me?”

“I’m not sure what I could possibly teach you, Lord Mercury. You probably know my language better than I do at this point,” Luke replied, glancing around as he entered a classroom that resembled an auditorium. Rows of chairs filled the space, each paired with a long table, and at the front stood the teacher’s desk, a whiteboard looming behind it.

“Perhaps. But I’m still eager to hear the perspective of a native. Insights from someone like you are often enlightening,” Mercury said, brushing past Luke as he strode to the front desk. He settled into the chair, gently placing his granddaughter in his lap.

Luke felt a faint warmth stir at the sight, a subtle tingling low in his gut that he brushed off almost immediately. It was nothing—absolutely nothing.

“If I think of another word, I’ll let you know,” Luke answered absentmindedly, is voice trailing off as he let his attention wander, anything to distract himself. As he walked past the rows of tables, he felt Mercury’s gaze on him. Then his eyes caught on something—a piece of paper resting on one of the tables.

He picked it up and discovered it was an overview of the courses offered by the university, which instantly piqued his interest. The list was extensive, featuring a mix of subjects. Some felt absurdly impractical for the real world—*The Art of Poetry in Warfare* caught his eye in particular—while others were more conventional, the kind that made him pause and consider for a moment longer.

Hesitating for a moment, he neatly folded the paper and tucked it into his pocket. It felt foolish—he was Greek, after all—but perhaps there was still a chance for him. He remembered how the two Camps had united in the books, and a flicker of hope ignited in his chest, even as he tried to ignore the signs that hinted this time would be different, though not without difficulty.

Luke bit his lip and shot a discreet glance at Mercury, who lounged at the desk with an air of self-satisfaction, his expression reminiscent of a contented cat.

This whole Greek-Roman dynamic felt so much stranger, so much more mysterious than it had ever seemed in the books. The more time he spent with Mercury, the more he began to think that maybe Kat had been onto something all along.

The thought unsettled him, a flicker of fear sparking at the idea that reality was far more complicated than he'd imagined. And yet, beneath it, a strange sense of relief began to surface. It made him glance at the god again—just for a moment—before he caught himself and quickly turned away.

Shoving the thoughts aside, Luke kept walking, weaving around the classroom without really thinking about where he was going. Then Mercury's voice broke the quiet.

"Lucas."

Luke stopped, turning to face the god, now wearing a serious frown.

With a small gesture, Mercury summoned another chair in front of the desk and motioned for Luke to sit. He didn't say anything, just waited, bouncing Lucretia gently on his knee. His expression gave nothing away, and the silence only made the unease in Luke's chest grow sharper.

Once Luke settled into the chair, Mercury leaned forward, resting his elbows on the desk and lacing his fingers under his chin. His gaze was steady, fixed intently on Luke, and his tone carried a rehearsed air—one Luke had come to recognize from the god's dealings.

"*Columba*, what do you know of *Rex Aureae Aetatis*?" Mercury asked, almost casually.

*What?*

Luke furrowed his brows, confusion written all over his face. He had no idea what the god was talking about. Mercury's eyes narrowed briefly, and then realization flickered across his face—though Luke couldn't help but think it should've hit him sooner.

Of course Luke wouldn't know the Roman terms; he wasn't Roman.

*Silly man.*

The god huffed lightly, irritation flickering across his face for the briefest second before his composure returned. “The King of the Golden Age, the Lord of Sowing, the Bearer of Crops.”

*Saturn.*

The realization hit Luke, his stomach tightening instinctively, a pitch of dread rising unbidden. Kronos’ Roman counterpart.

Mercury regarded him for a few moments, his expression unreadable, before letting out a peeved sound and rolling his eyes. It was very inelegant—wasn’t he supposed to be all about keeping himself composed?

“Jewel, don’t be so affected,” he said, his tone edged with annoyance. “The Lord of Sowing is retired now, living in what you call Italy, tucked away in his little Golden Age retreat. He rarely comes here and is nothing like that chaotic, uncivilized *Graecus* stirring up trouble on your side.”

It was the first time Mercury had brought up Kronos’ counterpart, even though he’d occasionally touched on Kronos-related topics last year. Not often, and mostly to needle the Greeks or complain about how their problems always spilled over onto the Roman side.

Once, he’d even demanded Luke hand over the card he’d given him, doing something that made it glow before handing it back. When Luke had asked what it was about, Mercury had only smirked—the silly, silly man that he was.

“He… won’t cause trouble?” Luke asked, just to be sure.

“No, he’s respected and civilized,” Mercury replied, his tone sharp but casual. He didn’t seem to notice—or care—that the baby was happily munching on his coat, which, Luke had to admit, was pretty cute. Not that he’d ever say it out loud.

“He’s *not* like the one on your side,” the god added, his expression darkening as his eyes flashed silver. His aura thickened, the shift so tangible that Lucretia stopped munching to stare up at him, her lip wobbling as though on the verge of tears.

“The one that was trying to *steal* you.”

Luke averted his gaze, pressing his lips together as his hands fidgeted in his lap.

Mercury had found out.

How, exactly, wasn’t something Luke wanted to dwell on, though a nagging voice in the back of his mind whispered that if Mercury knew, Hermes likely did too. The thought made Hermes’ distant behavior feel even more suspicious. Mercury, however, had gone in the opposite direction, clinging to Luke like glue.

*Carrapato².*

He'd even started attending Grandma's lessons out of nowhere, and not just sitting in—he was teaching Luke things, too.

And his grandma was letting him!

The Roman had explained once that while his domains were similar to Hermes', their focus differed. Still, he insisted he could help, and Luke hadn't exactly refused. Even so, he couldn't shake the feeling that there was something the god wanted in return—it always worked that way. Yet, so far, Mercury had asked for nothing.

Luke couldn't deny the help had been useful, though.

It was through Mercury that Luke had learned about his new power—the one he'd used against Kronos and his aura. It was connected to boundaries, and Luke had grown somewhat decent at it. It came more naturally than seeing through the Mist, that was for sure. Still, Mercury never seemed satisfied, his judging looks making it clear he found Luke's progress lacking.

Well, Luke was mortal, so… what did he expect?

The baby's cry cut through the moment, snapping Luke's attention instantly. It seemed to startle Mercury too; his oppressive aura vanished as quickly as it had appeared. He turned to Lucretia, his gaze puzzled, as though she were some strange puzzle he couldn't quite figure out.

Luke watched him silently for a moment before letting out a quiet sigh. "Give her to me," he said, holding out his arms.

Mercury hesitated briefly, his brows knitting as if this entire situation was beyond him—a reminder, once again, that he was anything but mortal. Still, he eventually passed the baby to Luke.

Luke cradled Lucretia carefully, patting her back and rocking her gently as he shushed her. Slowly, her cries began to subside, the tension in her small frame easing bit by bit.

Once she was calm, Luke glanced back at Mercury. "Why did you ask me that if he's not causing problems?"

Mercury studied him for a moment, tilting his head slightly. When he finally spoke, his voice was measured but distant, as if his thoughts were elsewhere. "The Lord of Sowing is important to the Romans. My people will side with him. But he is not the Crooked One." His tone darkened as he continued, "That one is bodiless, for now."

His eyes locked on Luke's, piercing and serious. "You *need* to understand the difference."

Unsure, Luke nodded, his thoughts spinning with the implications. Over and over, the same realization settled in—this reality was turning out to be different from the one he thought he knew. Was that a good thing? A bad one?

The silence between them stretched, heavy and uncertain, broken only by the soft hum the god let out as he rested his cheek on his hand, his unblinking gaze fixed on Luke.

For a single moment, Mercury opened his mouth, then hesitated, something flickering in his eyes so out of character it made Luke frown. Mercury was always smug, always so sure of himself. What could possibly make him falter now?

When the god finally spoke, his voice was calm and composed, as if he had never faltered in the first place.

"Also," Mercury began, his tone deliberate, "it's come to my attention that you have a sister who went missing?"

Luke stiffened, his body going tense as he cast a cautious glance at the god. "Yes… I have a sister, but no one knows where she is."

"Well, I do." Mercury's eyes gleamed faintly, their silver glow giving them an almost alien feel as he continued, "And Hermes does too."

Chapter End Notes

1 - Tu tá mais espilicute nesses tempos modernos – You're more showy these modern days – Espilicute is a regional slang term, and it can mean a range of things, from vain to full of themselves, and it's usually directed at girls or women.
2 - Carrapato - Tick

New Rome. Mercury finally took Luke there, and as we can see, he's trying very hard to show off how much better it is, lol. As for Mercuralia – it's a festival that honors Mercury, mostly for merchants, business people, and the like. And of course, Mercury would absolutely drag Luke to his festival – no doubt about it, lol. A chance to show off? A man as smug as him? Obviously.

And the baby – that was a fun chance to show that Mercury does have other sides besides being a creepy, raw-meat-eating weirdo. But he's still a god, so naturally, he's uncanny and doesn't quite grasp how babies work. And yeah… he totally invaded his daughter's house and snatched the baby without her knowing. So the whole time he had her, his daughter was losing her mind. Maybe she eventually realized it was Mercury (it was Mercuralia, after all), and she probably knows her father well enough to guess. Maybe.

Mr. D knows about the "dates." He got real mad about it – probably had a breakdown over how his nephew only ever seems to bring more problems into his life. He cracked open a Diet Coke (while wishing it was wine) and spiraled in misery. Then he definitely tried to stop Luke from meeting Mercury – only for Mercury to stroll right up to the camp borders with his Roman stink. And naturally, Mercury started making too much sense, which just pissed Mr. D off more. But for all his grumbling, he's not about to

jeopardize Luke's safety by alerting the rest of the pantheon. Now he just has to tolerate this Roman dog, but you know he's keeping a very close eye on him.

Meanwhile, Mercury is rapid-firing questions at Luke – like one of those kids who asks a million things in under a minute – and Luke is not amused. And yes, Mercury was just blessing every place Luke visited, lol.

The Portuguese bit? I thought it was adorable! Mercury trying to imitate Luke, and Luke laughing at his accent (Mercury was doing it on purpose in my head – my man is a god of language, after all) because it was cute. Plus, that whole scene with the baby was precious.

But then… lore dump. Mercury casually drops the whole Kronos and Saturn thing and dives deeper into Greek/Roman stuff. According to Roman mythology, Saturn, unlike Kronos, wasn't chopped to bits in Tartarus – he was exiled. His golden age happened after that, so I imagine him as way more chill. He's also much more respected – his connection to crops and abundance plays into that (as Mercury pointed out with the epithets). Plus, Saturnalia. So yeah, Saturn's got influence.

And the biggest reveal – Mercury knows where Abigail is… and so does Hermes.

Oh, and yeah – Luke's into DILFs.

Thank you so much for reading! Comments are always appreciated – and hey, it doesn't matter if you're late to the party!

So… what do you guys think is up with Hermes? (Tip: The man's sulky these days.)

I hope everyone had nice holidays!

# Chapter 46: SoM - Poison

Chapter Summary

A few months later, Luke is back at Camp, with his dog and a new hobby—guarding the barriers.

Alas, things never stay quiet for long.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Stay alert, Pipo," Luke murmured, standing watch by Thalia's tree, every nerve taut as he scanned the horizon, not daring to look away even for a second.

Beside him, the hellhound lay sprawled on the ground with a distinctly irritated gleam in his red eyes, unmoving despite Luke's commands. Pipo had already patrolled the perimeter a dozen times before he finally dropped and refused to budge, no matter how much Luke coaxed him. Begrudgingly, Luke conceded the hound deserved a break—but that didn't mean he could slack off. He still needed Pipo's sharper senses to catch anything unusual that might escape his own.

As he glanced around, snapping his head at every sound, Luke took in his surroundings.

The day was, by all accounts, ordinary. There was nothing to justify his heightened vigilance; the sky stretched clear and blue above, without a trace of last year's storm clouds. The horizon glowed a vivid green beneath the sun, a faint gray line—the road—cutting through it. Thalia's tree looked larger, its trunk thicker, reaching higher toward the sky as if stretching to meet the King of the Sky himself.

Luke wondered if the tree's growth meant Thalia was growing too. He knew she hadn't stopped aging in the books; her aging had only slowed, perhaps because trees grow slowly.

But the thought saddened him, so he pushed it from his mind.

Shifting his thoughts, Luke reflected on the past few days. Camp had been peaceful—or at least as peaceful as it could be, given the tension that never truly went away. Everyone else seemed content to try and relax—everyone but him.

He couldn't bring himself to.

Glancing behind him, squinting to make out the distance, he saw life going on as usual: a handful of kids, those who stayed year-round, playing in the fields. Their numbers were

thinner than normal, something that gnawed at him, even if others dismissed it as meaningless—or were trying very hard to.

To him, it was pure stupidity.

How could everyone turn a blind eye and pretend everything was fine when it wasn't?

Last year's events had been enough to put anyone on edge, at least in his opinion. A demigod—no, a *group* of demigods, he corrected with a heavy heart and a frown—had dared to steal from the gods, on Olympus of all places. As if that wasn't enough, the news about Kronos—well, *someone* working against the gods—was out there now.

The gods knew. That much he was sure of, especially after Percy's almost-dying incident last year. Percy had told Annabeth and Chiron what he knew, which meant Mr. D knew, too. And if Mr. D knew, then the other gods definitely knew. His disappearances afterward, always muttering about 'bothersome meetings,' were proof enough.

The kids… well, they were kids. Tense, sure, but not enough to really understand. Instead, they pretended everything was fine. And honestly? Luke couldn't blame them. Nothing had happened since then—at least, not yet.

Most of them believed it was a one-time thing, just an act of rebellion that would be dealt with soon enough. They didn't think they'd have to do anything. Not while they were safe inside the magical barriers, shielded from the outside world.

But Luke knew better.

This was the calm before the storm.

Something was coming. He could feel it—a creeping certainty that someone would come to poison Thalia's tree, to weaken the borders, to leave Camp exposed. It had happened in the books, and he doubted it would be any different this time. Not with Thalia being a child of the Big Three.

Not with Kronos's… well, everything.

*Unacceptable.*

So here he was, guarding the barriers every single day with his hellhound, from dawn till dusk, even as everyone insisted he should stop. Sometimes Argus would join him, setting aside his *dislike* of Cabin Eleven to help, though even the security guard wasn't around as often as he was—probably off doing something for Hera, playing the lackey for her, or whatever else the giant did. Most thought his vigilance was because of his brother leaving and the whole thief situation, and sure, that was part of it.

He hadn't felt normal since that cursed day, not really.

But that wasn't the whole reason—not even close.

Placing his hand on the tree trunk, he felt the rough bark bite into his palm and pressed harder until it almost hurt, grounding himself. His brow furrowed as memories surfaced—his brother's gaze, first angry, then frightened, followed by Ethan emerging from the forest.

Things were happening in similar ways, and he *feared*.

Luke feared he would be useless, that everything he was doing might amount to nothing—or worse, that he wasn't doing enough, that he was being too passive in this game with the Fates.

And he feared *that* was closer to the truth than he wanted to admit.

Running from fate was supposed to be impossible—Camp's lessons drilled that in well enough—but Luke was different. An *anomaly.* His thread wasn't something the Fates could twist and cut at their whim.

He remembered that moment—the way his thread refused to bend under their touch—and something petty in him had been satisfied by it.

And the *relief.*

*Endless nights without sleep, anxiety coiling tight in his chest, haunted by the thought that Book Luke's fate might become his.*

*His, his, his.*

Luke pressed his lips together, dragging himself out of the spiral. His mind drifted back to his first trip to Olympus—the accidental detour into the gods' district—and, most importantly, the Fates' house. They'd shown him plenty. His past. His past *life.*

But his future?

That had been a different story. Blurry. Impossible to read.

It was like listening to radio static, annoying and incomprehensible.

For years, that visit had been a passing curiosity, something he wondered about now and then but never for too long. Now, though, it felt more relevant than ever.

He could change something—maybe he was the only one who could.

But what would that mean for everyone else? His friends, his family—their threads remained tightly woven in the Fates' hands, while events marched along the path set in the books.

Deep down, he *knew* the Moirai wouldn't unravel their entire tapestry, especially not when it was related to something as monumental as a Great Prophecy.

It was already set in stone, declared years before he'd even been born.

Luke took a deep breath and exhaled slowly, letting his shoulder rest against the tree's rough bark. As he gazed past the barrier, he knew he'd have to act more aggressively from now on. His hesitation had already done enough damage—the faces of his brother and Levi's brother flickered through his mind, a reminder of the cost.

Then there was what Mercury had told him, all those months ago, the revelation that he knew where Abigail was—and that his father did too.

Clicking his tongue, Luke crossed his arms angrily, replaying that conversation in his mind. The god had told him a lot and yet hardly anything at all. Abigail was alive—that alone had lifted a weight off Luke's chest that he hadn't even realized he'd been carrying, letting him breathe a little easier. And she wasn't on mortal land. That had been enough to set Luke's mind racing.

However, he hadn't asked Mercury outright—not yet, anyway. He didn't feel ready for that.

And he knew that if he did, the god *would* answer.

Mercury always did.

Uncrossing his arms, Luke slipped a hand into his pocket, gripping the card there tightly.

What made him angriest, though, was knowing that his father had known where Abigail was but had kept it from Camp, from her other dad, and from Luke himself, all while Mr. D searched everywhere for her.

It could be a lie, he supposed, but Mercury was many things—annoying, arrogant, and as slippery as they came—but when it came to Hermes, he'd never lied. He took far too much pleasure in comparing himself to Luke's father, always proving he was better, as silly as that… *rivalry* was.

So the claim was true; Luke was sure of it, and the knowledge stirred a tangled knot of emotions in his chest, one he couldn't ignore or push away, no matter how hard he tried.

Taking a deep breath, he detached himself from Thalia's tree and glanced back over his shoulder, giving a whistle to Pipo. His hellhound whined and stubbornly stayed put, but a second, sharper whistle—paired with a raised eyebrow and an unimpressed look—prompted Pipo to give a grumbling bark before heaving himself up.

Dragging his paws along the ground, he left behind deep furrows that Luke noted would've angered the nymphs if they'd been on their territory, and would probably still irk the satyrs.

But at least the hellhound was following, even if grudgingly and with a bit of bratty resistance.

Luke stayed on high alert as he walked the Camp's border, turning his head at every noise and casting wary glances behind him, checking to see if anything had changed in the spots he'd just passed.

Even he could admit it was bordering on paranoid—maybe even for him—but he couldn't help it.

He walked on, eventually reaching the sea limit, pausing to take in the waves as they crashed against the shore.

For a moment, he wondered if the kids would need to head to the Sea of Monsters this year, but he pushed the thought away, focusing instead on the scent of salt in the air.

The memory of a day at the beach with his once-family drifted into his mind: his father lifting him—then her—into the waves, holding him up as the water lapped at his feet, while his mother laughed and snapped photos. It was a beautiful memory, but it stirred a bittersweet ache in his chest.

That life was gone, and he would never see them again.

His current mother and father were so different—though his now-mother had once seemed so much like his former mother, back when things were good, before madness took over…

Pipo nudged his snout against Luke's side, drawing his attention to the dog's inquisitive eyes—eyes that seemed tinged with worry. It always amazed Luke how expressive Pipo could be, despite having a face so unlike a human's. Or maybe, he thought with a faint snort, he just understood the dog that well.

Perhaps it was yet another inheritance from his father.

Shaking his head at the thought, Luke reached up to pat Pipo's head, and the dog gave a small whine, ears perking up in that way he did when he was confused.

*Understanding dogs,* Luke mused to himself. *What a ridiculous idea.*

"Let's go back, Pipo. There's nothing here," Luke murmured, giving the hellhound one last scratch behind the ears before turning to retrace his steps. This time, he heard Pipo following without the earlier grudginess, his paws padding more willingly on the ground.

"Silly dog," he muttered with a faint smirk, catching the hellhound's soft huff as they made their way back.

As soon as they reached Thalia's tree, Pipo froze. The fur along his neck stood on end, his ears pitched forward, lips peeling back to reveal sharp fangs in a soundless snarl. Luke's body tightened at the sight, and he whipped around, following the hellhound's gaze. He'd long since learned to trust Pipo's instincts above his own—Pipo always sensed it first, the faintest stir of danger, whether it was a lone monster or, back then, the horde that had threatened Camp, or even... his sister's death.

Urgency nipped at his heels like a pack of hounds as Luke scanned the barrier, straining to catch sight of whatever it was Pipo had already zeroed in on.

Soon, though, he saw them—a group of monsters barreling toward Camp: small cyclopes, oversized animals, a scattering of harpies.

Nothing a group of veterans couldn't handle, but for him alone it could be pushing it. Then again, he had Pipo. And regardless, monsters had no place near the Camp's barriers; they were a risk to every demigod inside, especially to the ones still on their way.

Just seeing them here felt wrong—the barriers should've kept them hidden from the monsters' senses, scent and all, if Luke had it right.

Thankfully, it wasn't a large enough group to threaten the borders. But then he spotted something else—a nimble, covered figure weaving through the monsters, suspiciously human-like.

His heart leapt into his throat, and a curse slipped out before he could stop it.

The attempt on the tree was happening, just as Luke had feared, but there was no satisfaction in being right, not when the stakes were this high.

Luke tightened his grip on Pipo's fur, eyes locked on the figure darting between monsters. Each time it slipped behind one, it reappeared farther along, moving so fluidly it seemed almost part of the shadows themselves.

A demigod.

It was the only explanation. His heart went cold as his first thought leapt to his brother—Chris. But he shook it off, reasoning it couldn't be him. Chris wouldn't risk something this stupid, not after being banned from Camp, not with Mr. D setting the barriers against him so firmly.

No, it had to be someone else. Maybe that unknown agent from outside?

*But it didn't matter now.*

Luke tensed, eyes straining to keep the intruder in sight as they darted through the monster crowd. His hand gripped Pipo's fur even tighter, and the hellhound responded with a low, menacing growl, ready to spring.

Without taking his eyes off the intruder, Luke murmured, "Go hunt, Pipo. I'll handle the demigod."

He gave the hellhound a nudge, and Pipo shot forward, tearing into the cluster of monsters like a beast unleashed. The hellhound snarled, scattering creatures left and right; a harpy went flying before Pipo caught it mid-air, shaking it until it disintegrated, leaving shimmering streaks of gold dust clinging to his fur, especially around his snout.

Soon after, Luke surged ahead, dead set on reaching the intruder. He vaulted over monsters, slid beneath snapping jaws, dodging with quick, practiced movements—it wasn't hard; these creatures weren't serious threats, and he was fast. But there were too many, far too many. Even as Pipo tore through their ranks, scattering golden dust like confetti, the monsters barely registered the hellhound. Their focus was locked solely on him, lunging to trip him up, claws and fangs flashing as they lunged to tear him down.

It made alarm bells go off in his mind. Was this some kind of countermeasure against him? Sure, it wasn't a secret that he patrolled the borders daily, but this felt… intentional.

But he could handle it—he had to. He was the only one who could.

Quickening his pace as the intruder came into view, Luke pushed himself harder, his legs burning as he closed the distance. The demigod turned their head for a brief moment, eyes locking with Luke's for a fraction of a second—*green eyes*, wide with panic. Luke's heart skipped as he reached out, fingers almost brushing the fabric of their clothes. But then a familiar sensation prickled at his skin, a cold, unnatural shift in the air.

Shadows slithered across the ground like living things, crawling up the demigod's body until they consumed the intruder entirely, pulling them into the darkness.

*Shadow traveling. Just like his sister's ability.*

Whipping his head around in agitation, Luke strained to track every shifting shadow across the plains, trying to guess where the intruder would appear next. His mind screamed at him, still reeling from what he had just witnessed. Was this another sibling, someone with the same rare ability Abigail had? The thought haunted him, even as monsters lunged at him, forcing him to dodge and twist out of the way.

In the distance, Pipo's snarls and growls echoed, mixed with the screeches of harpies and the pained growls of cyclopes.

The chaos surrounded him, inside and out, but he couldn't lose focus. He forced himself to stay sharp. The intruder was still out there. Thalia's tree was in danger.

*Camp was in danger.*

Luke couldn't fail.

*Not again.*

Out of the corner of his eye, Luke saw the unknown demigod slip out from the shadow of a harpy, dangerously close to the barriers, too close, too close, too close to the *tree*.

His teeth clenched, and Luke surged forward, forcing his way through the monsters that crowded around him. He punched a harpy aside, kicked a cyclops in the stomach, and slammed smaller creatures to the ground with such violence that some crumbled into golden dust.

But he didn't spare them a second glance. His focus was entirely on the danger ahead.

They tried to surround him, to slow him down, but he wasn't stopping. His feet pounded the earth, the sound loud in his ears, matching the frantic rhythm of his heart, driven by a mix of anger, fear, and utter urgency.

The intruder was almost at the tree when they suddenly spun around. The edges of their cloak snapped through the air as they raised their hands, and Luke barely caught the faint mutter of

a command—some kind of chant, low and urgent.

Then the air shifted.

*Something* rose around them. It spread outward, surrounding Luke, wrapping around every creature in the area.

Then the world around Luke started to shift. The monsters seemed to multiply, growing bigger, and he felt off-balance, like the world had tilted to the left while he stayed anchored in the right. The strange energy wrapped around him, making everything feel... wrong, disorienting.

But there was no time to think about it. The monsters closed in on him, a single mass converging from every direction. And, oddly enough, through the haze, it almost looked like they were merging into one—a giant, monstrous thing, moving as one toward him.

He cursed, willing his legs to move despite the world spinning around him. He dodged as best he could, every instinct focused on reaching the tree.

It still felt wrong—a creeping sensation prickling his skin, a warning in his bones that something was terribly off.

As he ducked under a cyclops's swinging fist, he used the momentum to scale its arm, swinging himself around its torso. Locking his legs around its neck, he tilted back and over, snapping its neck with a sharp twist. The monster disintegrated into dust beneath him, coating him in a fine golden haze.

Luke barely registered it, his focus unwavering as he swiftly regained his posture and broke into a run.

The monsters hadn't stopped hunting him.

Under a fog of unease, he barely heard Pipo's howls, but the sound was distant, lost in the roar of his own thoughts.

All that filled his mind was the tree.

He was almost there—closer and closer, dodging, punching, kicking, and taking down monsters left and right. Then, finally, he reached the intruder. He rushed at them, intending to shove the other demigod to the ground, but as he barreled forward, something cold passed through him. His body went straight through them, like they weren't even there, and he crashed to the ground, stunned and disoriented, completely alone.

Lying on the ground, his mind spinning and the urge to vomit rising in his throat, he felt it.

A barely-there sensation, one he'd felt before, many times. The one he now recognized—the one his grandmother had tried to make him *see*, again and again. *The Mist.* Each time he'd failed to fully grasp it—sometimes more than others.

But this time… this time he had failed when he really shouldn't have.

Panic surged in his chest, tightening it until he could barely breathe. Luke shoved back the nausea and dizziness, forcing himself to focus on the sensation prickling his skin. He concentrated harder than he ever had before, and slowly, his *sight* became clear.

He *saw* through the Mist.

And what he *saw* made his eyes widen and his breath hitch.

There, beside Thalia's tree, quite a distance away—too far, his chest constricted with the awful realization that he couldn't reach it in time—was the intruder. They looked small next to the towering tree, which had grown so much in the past few years. In their hand was a gleaming bronze syringe, catching the light of the sun.

The soft murmur of a chant hovered in the air, drowned by the chaos of the fighting still raging around him.

It wasn't until this moment—just as he finally realized that the tree beside him was completely normal—that the full weight of the situation hit him.

The whole time, in his frantic rush to stop the intruder, this had been happening right under his nose.

And he hadn't *seen* it.

Hastily, Luke pushed himself to his feet, but the world felt like it was moving in slow motion as he watched, no matter how fast he tried to move. The enemy demigod stopped chanting and injected the tree with a syringe, the needle sinking into the wood as if it were paper. Luke felt the barriers shake, not just in the air but deep in his bones, and a wave of fury washed over him. A scream tore from his throat, and the intruder's head snapped toward him, their eyes wide with panic.

They immediately turned and fled, trying to bend the Mist once more, but Luke was done.

He pushed aside the familiar prickle of the Mist, the weight of it wrapping around him, and zeroed in on the demigod ahead.

Everything else faded, the world narrowing into a tunnel of focus, tinted red, the pounding of his heart drowning out all else. Fury burned through him, sharp and raw, fueling his every step. Like a hound on a hunt, his vision cleared, the scales that had once clouded it now gone.

He would not be tricked again. He would not be blind anymore.

As swiftly as he could, Luke charged forward, but the monsters swarmed him, converging in a relentless tide. They ignored Pipo, even as the hellhound tore through their ranks, focusing solely on Luke. Within moments, a living mass of creatures—weak, but far too many for him to handle alone—stood between him and his target.

Too furious to care, too furious to think, Luke hurled himself into the fray, unarmed.

His thoughts spun wildly, but one name kept circling back, looping over and over like a mantra—*Chris, Chris, Chris.*

He'd thought—*hoped,* stupidly—that he'd see him.

Luke wouldn't hurt his brother. Not again. That's why he was unarmed.

*Not again.*

Sanity slipped further with each blow as he punched, kicked, and slammed his way through. Violence coursed through him like a second heartbeat, and a twisted satisfaction sparked in him at the sound of bones cracking and the feel of golden dust settling on his skin.

These creatures stood between him and his goal. They had to be removed.

But Luke was only one demigod.

No matter how hard he fought, no matter how desperately he tried to push through the swarm, the intruder slipped further and further away. He was trapped, stuck in place, forced to watch in mounting frustration as the enemy paused and turned to look back at him—straight at him.

For a fleeting second, the wind swept aside their hood, revealing a face. *Young.* That was Luke's first thought. *A boy.* His second. And then the third hit him with the weight of a stone: *He didn't recognize him.*

Before he could dwell on it, movement shifted behind the boy. Another figure appeared, taller, older. Luke's fury sharpened, the thrumming in his veins growing louder, almost unbearable.

This second intruder turned as well, their gaze locking onto Luke. And something strange stirred deep inside him—a jarring, unwanted flicker of déjà vu. He couldn't shake the sense that he knew this person, even though their features were impossible to make out.

Then, without a word, both figures turned and walked away, their forms growing smaller with every step.

Luke's struggles grew wild, desperate, as he fought to break free, to chase after them.

*But it was useless.*

Frustration threatening to consume him, Luke seized a mutated animal—some kind of creature he didn't bother to identify. His grip tightened until it whimpered, a pitiful sound that only fueled his rage. With a snarl, he slammed it into the ground, pouring every ounce of his anger, fear, and self-hatred into the motion.

The impact was so forceful that the creature dissolved instantly, golden dust scattering into the air.

Then, as if responding to an unspoken signal, the remaining monsters froze, their attacks on Luke halting abruptly. Pipo, however, showed no such hesitation, tearing through the stunned creatures with relentless fury.

Several turned into golden dust before the rest finally broke ranks and fled.

Whistling sharply, Luke broke into a run, his eyes fixed on their retreating forms. Pipo appeared at his side in an instant, obedient as ever. Without breaking stride, Luke grabbed a fistful of the hellhound's thick fur, hauling himself onto the massive beast's back.

His narrowed eyes tracked the fleeing creatures, noting on the back of his mind that they were heading in the same direction as the intruders.

Mercilessly, Pipo tore through the remaining monsters, his jaws snapping and crushing as they pressed on, but the longer they ran, the heavier the realization settled in Luke's chest. No matter how many monsters they killed, no matter how fast they pushed forward, the enemy demigods were gone.

Luke clenched his teeth, swallowing down the scream of frustration burning in his throat.

Leaning forward, he tapped Pipo's neck sharply. His voice, tight with anger, was barely steady. "Go back, Pipo. We lost them." The words scraped at his throat, bitter and raw, and he muttered them again, quieter this time, as if trying to make sense of his failure. "*We lost them.*"

The way back blurred into a haze of frustration and self-hatred—he had failed again. The Fates had won, as they always seemed to do, no matter how hard he tried, no matter how much he gave.

*Useless.*

When Luke reached the borders, he noticed, with a detached sort of interest, that Mr. D and Chiron were already there, their gazes fixed on something.

For a brief moment, Mr. D's form flickered—larger, more imposing than the uncle Luke was used to—but it vanished too quickly for him to catch the details. Blinking rapidly, confused, Luke followed their gaze. It wasn't until he focused that he realized, with a jolt, he could faintly see it too.

*The barrier.*

And it was… rotting, for lack of a better word. From what little he could make out, it shimmered faintly, weakly, like it was barely holding itself together.

Stopping beside them, Luke dismounted as Pipo lowered himself to the ground, allowing him to slide off with ease. His feet had barely touched the dirt before he stepped forward to join them.

"What happened here, Luke?" Mr. D asked the moment he approached, his eyes narrowed as he inspected the barrier.

With a swipe of his fingers through the air, he seemed to test something unseen. His expression twisted, frustration etched deep, but there was also something else—something rare.

*Concern.*

Luke felt his stomach sink. If his uncle, who so rarely cared about anything, was showing concern, then things were worse than he'd thought.

Steeling himself, Luke furrowed his brows and set his jaw before speaking. "Intruders, Uncle."

The effect was immediate. Mr. D turned sharply, his expression hardening, eyes narrowing into dangerous slits. Chiron mirrored the reaction, though his face betrayed more surprise than anger.

Luke forced himself to continue, keeping his voice steady. "I was patrolling the border with Pipo when we noticed a disturbance—a group of monsters just outside the barrier. They were weak, but still a threat. That was strange enough on its own, but then I saw someone among them. A person. A demigod. They were moving toward the barrier."

He paused, his lips tightening as he looked away. "I engaged, and Pipo handled the monsters, but…" His voice dropped, frustration creeping in. "The demigod slipped past me. A boy, maybe around my siblings' age, and he could manipulate the Mist."

At this, Mr. D and Chiron exchanged a loaded glance, their expressions darkening further.

Luke's tone dropped, quieter now, laced with bitterness. "I tried to stop him, but I couldn't. The Mist…" His voice faltered, sourness bleeding into his words. "When I came back to myself, he was already there—chanting something, a syringe in his hand. And before I could do anything, he injected whatever it was straight into Thalia's tree."

"An unknown demigod," Chiron said, his voice heavy with worry. "Perhaps one of ours—many have left this summer—or someone who never made it to us."

The creases around his eyes deepened as his gaze drifted beyond the borders—or perhaps to the barrier itself, flickering weakly, as if it were ill.

Luke's thoughts flickered to the other demigod he'd seen—the taller one, the one who had felt strangely familiar. Just as he opened his mouth to speak, Mr. D cut him off.

"The Olympian Council needs to be alerted," Mr. D declared, his voice carrying a rare weight of seriousness. He narrowed his eyes as he spoke, his expression hardening. "This has never happened before. The barriers, the ones the King himself placed around this Camp—they've always been untouchable." His gaze darkened further, a flicker of anger crossing his features. "Until now, apparently."

Luke hadn't realized just how serious this was. He knew it was a big deal from the books, but this level of urgency caught him off guard. To involve the Olympian Council—the twelve

gods themselves…

He hadn't thought they'd care about a demigod problem.

"An emergency meeting, Mr. D?" Chiron asked, his expression growing somber.

Mr. D simply nodded in response before turning his gaze to Luke, his eyes sharp. "And you will go with us, Luke Castellan, as a witness to this event. You will recount what you saw to the honored *Theoi*."

The weight of his words hung heavily in the air, pressing down on Luke like a physical force. For a moment, Luke stood frozen, blinking rapidly, his mind scrambling to catch up.

*Was he hearing this right?*

Before he could gather his thoughts, Mr. D continued, his eyes fixed on the barrier—the only thing standing between Camp Half-Blood and the danger outside.

"It seems we should have listened to you from the beginning," he muttered, his tone heavier than usual. "And this mistake has cost us… and perhaps will cost us even more."

Chapter End Notes

The attempt to break through the barriers—Luke tried hard to prevent it, but he's only one man. Well, one man and a hellhound, admittedly, but still just the two of them. More Abigail-related chaos, and now Luke is very, very mad at Hermes—and rightfully so. But, as with everything, there's a reason behind it… even if Hermes' logic isn't exactly something mortals would follow.

Anyway, a bunch of monsters and a wild demigod—one who isn't Chris or Ethan (since they've been banned). It's the logical step, really. Mr. D isn't about to let little traitors roam freely in his Camp, not after everything. Luke's blind spots are working against him here, but maybe there's a shift happening? A little hint of character development?? We'll see.

And then, of course, Thalia's tree gets poisoned, and everything goes to hell and back. Luke basically snapped—he's a strong demigod, so he held his own even without a sword. But really, he had Pipo watching his back, and the monsters were weak. If things had been any different… well, it wouldn't have ended well.

Finally, a meeting with the gods! Luke's going to be a bundle of nerves, but it's necessary. There will be people around to help him, though—both Mr. D and Chiron. I imagine this is the first time in centuries Dionysus of all gods called for a meeting, which is bound to raise some eyebrows.

Thanks for reading! Comments are always appreciated—and hey, it doesn't matter if you're late to the party!

So… any guesses on who the mystery demigod (or demigods) might be? And what do you guys think will happen at the meeting?

# Chapter 47: SoM - The Olympian Council

Chapter Summary

The meeting, and Luke is a nervous wreck.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Everything will be fine, Luke. You'll only need to recount what you saw—I'll do most of the talking as the heroes' teacher," Chiron reassured him, for what felt like the thousandth time. And just like the first nine hundred ninety-nine, it didn't help.

Luke grimaced, nodding silently as anxiety tightened his chest. He let his gaze wander around the room, searching for a distraction, before giving up and focusing on Chiron instead. The centaur offered a slight, somewhat forced smile before glancing into the empty meeting room.

Seizing the opportunity while Chiron wasn't looking at him, Luke's eyes drifted downward to the centaur's white horse half. Fully visible now, it was nervously tapping the ground—a reflection of Chiron's own unease, Luke realized.

It made sense why Chiron had appeared this way; entering the council room disguised as a human would have been seen as an insult.

*Who would dare deceive a god?*

In contrast to his restless horse half, Chiron's human half was dressed formally in a clean, if old-fashioned, black suit, complete with a bow tie. His hair was neater than Luke had ever seen it, the careful grooming lending him an air of quiet confidence.

Luke, too, was dressed formally—a requirement both his uncle and Chiron had insisted on to improve their chances of being heard. He found the idea frustrating; *surely* what was said should matter more than how they looked. Still, he had little choice.

Formal clothing had never been part of his life—despite Mercury occasionally dragging him to high-end places. The Roman god had never seemed to mind Luke's preference for casual, comfortable clothes, so he'd stuck with them. That habit, however, left him completely unprepared for situations like this.

With no suitable wardrobe of his own, arrangements had to be made.

Now he stood with his hair neatly styled—a gift from Inês and her sisters, who'd also added a touch of makeup with Aphrodite magic or whatever. He didn't mind, though he thought they

could've given him a warning first. At least it was subtle—just enough to mask the dark circles under his eyes from sleepless nights spent on his one-man patrols.

His outfit was equally unfamiliar: a high-neck black turtleneck under a formal brown jacket, paired with matching brown dress pants and polished black shoes. It was all formal stuff, entirely outside his comfort zone.

Luke much preferred his flip-flops—or, on rare occasions, sneakers—not to mention his usual baggy clothes. By contrast, this outfit felt stifling, both from the heat and the sheer awkwardness of wearing something so put-together. It wasn't exactly comfortable, but it wasn't like he had much of a choice.

Still, when he'd caught a glimpse of himself earlier in his cabin, he'd snorted, a flicker of amusement cutting through his unease. The outfit reminded him of something Mercury would wear—honestly, it felt like he was cosplaying the god. He could already imagine how insufferably smug Mercury would be if he ever found out.

It was a small, wry observation, but it offered a fleeting moment of levity amidst the chaos that had been bearing down on him lately.

The thought tugged a faint smile onto his face, letting him relax for just a moment. But it didn't last.

Mr. D appeared.

For once, his uncle looked serious, and it threw Luke off completely. He looked… different. More like himself, which meant no more slouched, grumpy uncle. Instead, he was taller, every inch the horned, otherworldly, pretty boy god.

Not that it made him any less intimidating. If Luke was being honest, when Mr. D showed up looking like *this,* it usually spelled trouble.

The purple suit only added to the effect. Luke had never seen his uncle wear anything like it before—it was always those tacky leopard-print shirts and shorts. This was different, starkly so, and it hammered the reality of the situation straight down his throat.

Suddenly, everything felt all the more real.

His palms grew clammy, and he instinctively rubbed them on his pants, trying to shake off the creeping nerves.

"Lucy," Mr. D greeted, his voice carrying its usual mix of mockery and boredom. His sharp eyes narrowed as he gave Luke a once-over before letting out a heavy sigh.

"I see you didn't manage to calm him down," he commented, turning toward Chiron, exasperation etched across his face.

Chiron's expression softened as he noticed Luke's anxious habit of rubbing his palms against his pants. Luke couldn't quite explain why he was sweating so much—he'd spoken before the gods plenty of times. He should've been used to it by now.

But this wasn't just another presentation about ancient Greek heroes or a polite request for more space in Cabin Eleven. This was *official business,* a formal appeal about something serious.

Everything depended on him today. On what he said.

The weight of that thought made his nerves spike, another wave of anxiety crashing over him. His eyes darted restlessly around the space outside the Olympians' meeting room, desperate for a distraction.

Through the towering columns, he could see the massive thrones ahead, their empty seats looming like specters of judgment.

His mind spiraled, imagining the gods in their full, colossal forms, seated high above, staring down at him. *Judging him.* Finding him unworthy. Rejecting his plea.

If *that* happened, it would be a disaster—not just for Camp, but for his kids too.

A heavy sigh from Chiron pulled him back to the present.

"I tried," Chiron said, his tone weary, "but as you can see, it didn't go as well as I'd hoped."

Both Chiron and Mr. D glanced at Luke for a moment, then exchanged a look and sighed in unison.

"Luke," his uncle began, stepping in front of him and blocking the view of the meeting room. "You'll be fine. All you have to do is tell them what you saw, and that's it." He gave Luke a reassuring tap on the shoulder. "Nothing more. Chiron's the one who'll do the talking."

Chiron walked over, his gentle smile meant to be soothing. "Don't worry, Luke," he added, his voice soft and calm. "I'll be right there with you the entire meeting."

Luke stared up at them, his gaze flicking between their faces before his brows furrowed with concern. After a brief pause, he asked, voice tinged with worry, "What if they ask questions?"

"Then you'll answer based on what you saw," Mr. D replied, adjusting Luke's jacket before meeting his eyes. Luke noticed the deep purple hue of his uncle's irises—not glowing, but dark, almost grape-like. "If they ask anything else, Chiron will handle it."

Luke shifted on his feet, casting a sidelong glance at the centaur, who nodded firmly, his presence reassuring.

Mr. D hesitated for a moment before continuing, "You'll be fine. You're here because you're the only one who witnessed the event firsthand. If we didn't need you, I wouldn't have bothered dragging you to this ridiculous meeting."

Fidgeting with his fingers, Luke turned his attention back to his uncle. Dionysus's face was calm, composed—neutral in that steady, grounding way he always managed when Luke was like this.

It worked.

Drawing a deep breath, Luke let it out slowly, his hands dropping to his sides as some of the tension eased from his shoulders. Not all of it, though. He doubted he'd ever feel fully calm in this place, but he could at least try to look like it.

He nodded a few times, his voice barely above a whisper. "Okay." Then, straighter now, he repeated with more strength, "Okay."

Mr. D studied him for a beat, then stepped aside, revealing the meeting room once more. This time, it wasn't empty. People—no, *gods,* Luke reminded himself—had gathered.

His uncle's gaze swept over the now-occupied space, displeasure etched into his features. He muttered with clear disdain, "Well, it seems the meeting is about to begin."

The look on his face made it abundantly clear he'd rather be anywhere else—a sentiment Luke understood all too well.

Maybe even more than his uncle did.

Dionysus sighed theatrically before spinning toward the massive arches leading to the Olympian throne room. Chiron followed closely behind, releasing a quieter, more exasperated sigh—one that spoke of long-held resignation to his companion's antics.

As they walked, Mr. D tossed a comment over his shoulder at Luke, who remained frozen in place, rooted by the chill sinking into his bones as the realization struck him like a lightning bolt.

It was starting.

It was starting *now.*

And Luke was *not* ready.

"Let's go. The sooner we get this over with, the sooner I can get back to my pinochle game. Maybe I'll even teach you to play like a civilized young man, Lucy," Mr. D quipped, his tone as dismissive as ever.

Forcing his feet to move, Luke hurried to catch up, falling into step just behind his uncle and staying close to Chiron, who offered a steady presence at his side. Their proximity helped, even if only a little, as he took in the sight of the throne room and the gods within it.

Luke had entered the throne room a handful of times over the years, usually during winter solstices, as was expected of a year-round camper. He avoided it whenever he could, skipping presentations whenever possible. Yet now, walking in, the scene felt as overwhelming as the very first time he'd stepped foot here.

The awe hit him again, just as fresh.

The throne room was as magnificent as he remembered, with towering columns stretching endlessly upward. Above, there wasn't an open sky, *not really.* It had a ceiling, but it looked magical—an expanse of stars shimmering and shifting to form constellations that seemed alive.

Each throne loomed massive and imposing, uniquely crafted to reflect the god it represented. Zeus and Hera's thrones dominated the center. Zeus' was the largest, as befitting the King of the Gods. Crafted from pristine white marble, it radiated authority and power, but what caught Luke's eye were the swirling thunderclouds within it, crackling faintly with electricity.

Hera's throne, equally regal but more refined, stood beside it. Slender and elegant, it was adorned with intricate patterns of blue, green, and purple, mirroring the constellations above. Its understated beauty conveyed both grace and command.

The grandeur of the room bore down on Luke, and for a moment, it was all he could do to keep walking.

The thrones curved outward in a semi-circle from Zeus and Hera's, with the male gods on Zeus' side and the females on Hera's.

Unable to help himself, Luke's gaze drifted toward his father's throne, empty for now. The sight stirred something sharp and bitter inside him. *What was Hermes doing?* He'd gone silent after last year.

An old, familiar hurt flared in Luke's chest, unbidden, as he remembered his father hadn't claimed Chris.

*Focus,* he told himself, shaking the thought away.

Hermes' throne stood simple and unassuming—almost plain, compared to the others. Like Cabin Eleven, it lacked any grand embellishment or flourish, as though it was purposefully understated. Yet it still stood tall, crafted of marble like the others, marking Hermes' place among the Olympians.

Luke studied it for a moment longer, his thoughts twisting. It felt fitting, in a way. Hermes was a traveler, a thief. His domain was the road, the in-between, the places no one else stayed for long. Maybe—just maybe—this throne reflected that.

The thought almost made sense.

But the realization made Luke grimace. He yanked his gaze away as if burned, his eyes scanning the rest of the room.

*If I'm starting to understand him, I need to be sent to an asylum.*

*Urgently.*

The day he actually *got* Hermes? That would be the day he knew he'd lost whatever was left of his sanity.

Some of the gods were already present, and Luke spotted a few—though not all—which brought a brief, almost foolish sense of relief. He knew more would arrive soon, but for now, he could breathe a little easier.

There was Hephaestus—or at least Luke assumed it was him—seated on a throne that looked more like a machine than anything else. The cane and the limp were clear giveaways, but he wasn't as ugly as Luke had expected. Instead, he carried that same unnerving perfection all the gods seemed to possess. Not handsome, exactly, but not hideous either. Just… otherworldly. Hephaestus barely spared them a glance, his dark eyes sweeping over the newcomers before returning to whatever he was tinkering with, his focus already elsewhere.

Then there was Apollo, looking every bit the celebrity. His perfect tan, dark sunglasses, and slicked-back golden hair screamed vanity. Everything about him radiated someone more interested in showing off than anything else. The way he held himself—with an arrogant, self-assured air—made it seem like the world existed purely for his amusement.

He sat on his throne, now fully god-like in size—intimidating and towering over them. The sight made Luke feel painfully small, and without thinking, he shuffled a little closer to Mr. D.

Apollo's throne was as extravagant as expected, practically blinding with its golden glow. Luke glanced away quickly—it reminded him too much of Cabin Seven, so bright it felt like it might scorch his retinas. *Tacky,* he thought. But if that was Apollo's taste, it wasn't Luke's place to judge.

Unlike Hephaestus, Apollo perked up when he noticed them. Sliding his sunglasses down, he stared—not at the group, but at Luke. His eyes stopped Luke cold.

They were so much like Lee's that, for a split second, Luke wondered if this was how people felt looking at his own eyes—the same shade as Hermes'. But Apollo's eyes weren't human. They burned, alive and amber, like twin suns trapped behind them.

Then Apollo smirked, his gaze sweeping over Luke in a way that made his skin crawl.

With deliberate ease, Apollo slid his sunglasses back into place and shifted on his throne. He sprawled across it as though he owned the room, limbs draped with that practiced effortlessness only someone so vain could pull off. Legs spread wide, head propped against his palm—the picture of arrogance.

Beside Luke, Mr. D shot a sharp look of judgment at his brother, muttering under his breath, "...Can't believe he's trying this." Then, in a deliberate move, Dionysus stepped between Luke and the sun god.

The gesture didn't fully block Apollo's gaze, but it still sparked a flicker of warmth in Luke's chest toward his uncle.

Soon enough, the other gods began to appear, materializing beside their thrones one by one, as though stepping out of thin air.

At last, his father arrived. Hermes gave Luke a brief look—a flicker of a furrowed brow—before sharply turning away and taking his seat without a word.

Zeus and Hera were the final ones to arrive, their presence filling the throne room as they took their places.

Zeus stood taller than the rest, more imposing, with black hair cascading to his shoulders in waves. The color matched Luke's father's hair, which made sense, given Zeus was Hermes' father. But unlike Hermes, Zeus wore a beard flecked with gray—likely deliberate, Luke thought, perhaps to pull off the 'silver fox' look.

His eyes were electric blue, sharp and intense, like lightning streaking across the sky before a storm. Objectively, Zeus was handsome—something Luke cringed at admitting, especially about *this* man. The god had a Mediterranean complexion, exuded an air of absolute authority, and wore a pristine white suit that gleamed under the constellation-like lights of the room.

In his hand, he held the Master Bolt, glancing at it every so often with a hint of unease. *Still paranoid,* Luke thought, no doubt because of last year's fiasco.

What struck Luke the most, though, was how much Zeus looked like Thalia. The resemblance was undeniable. It didn't matter that Luke had only seen her briefly in battle, right before she'd been turned into a tree by *this man.*

Beside Zeus sat Hera, regal and composed, her expression carefully neutral. Her black hair was braided into intricate plaits woven with golden ribbons, shimmering as though spun from sunlight. Her soft brown eyes glowed faintly with that unnerving divine quality Luke had come to associate with all gods.

She was stunning—even Luke had to admit that. Her features were noble rather than soft, elegant rather than gentle, but beautiful all the same. Her striking white gown—clearly coordinated to match Zeus's suit—seemed designed to present a unified front. Draped over her shoulders was a cloak of shimmering peacock feathers, and atop her head rested a golden crown that emphasized her undeniable air of royalty.

Both the King and Queen of the gods wore stern expressions as their gazes swept across the Hall of the Gods, carrying the weight of judgment. They revealed nothing of their thoughts, offering no clues about what to expect.

Luke had hoped for some sign, something to ground him or prepare him, but there was nothing.

Anxious, he cast a quick, sweeping glance around the room, trying to take in as many gods as possible before the meeting began. He needed to gauge the mood, to get a sense of the room, while keeping a low profile and avoiding attention.

Poseidon sat nearby, his seat beside Zeus. The sea god wore a sea-green button-up shirt paired incongruously with a fisherman's hat, his glowing eyes betraying clear irritation. Luke didn't have to guess why—Poseidon was likely annoyed at being pulled away from his

undersea palace. And after last year's poisoning of Percy, the sea god's mood had been anything but friendly.

The things Mr. D had mentioned after Percy returned home and the *news* spread still stuck with Luke. Those had been grim days for sailors—so many ships sinking under Poseidon's wrath that every time Luke visited his grandma, there seemed to be fresh news of yet another disaster at sea.

Poseidon, too, had been the loudest voice calling for severe punishments if Chris or Ethan were ever caught—punishments so harsh that Luke found himself hoping his brother and Levi's brother stayed hidden, even if it meant more problems for everyone. They were just kids. They didn't deserve to die like that, not in pain and suffering.

Luke doubted Percy knew anything about it, but thinking of the boy only emphasized how much Poseidon resembled him—like an older, more uncanny version of Percy, but colder, harder, and devoid of warmth.

It was deeply unsettling.

Luke shifted his gaze, landing on Athena, who sat across from Poseidon, beside Hera. Her back was as straight as steel, and her gray eyes were as stern and unyielding as he had imagined—a gaze that could only belong to Annabeth's mother.

Seeing her brought Ryan to mind, and Luke couldn't help but wonder where that disciple of Judas had disappeared to. He hadn't heard a word about him in what felt like ages.

Aphrodite, meanwhile, flicked a finger through her hair, the motion so reminiscent of Inês that Luke almost laughed. But as he watched, her form shimmered, her blonde hair momentarily darkening to a deep brown. Then, for the briefest instant, she flickered again, and Luke caught a glimpse of something else: *Passion—raw, overwhelming, and almost suffocating.*

The sensation sent a shiver down Luke's spine, and he quickly turned his attention to Ares instead.

The god's flaming eyes burned with a familiar intensity, instantly bringing Clarisse to mind—and, to a lesser extent, Peter. If Luke was honest, though, Peter was far too zen to be a true comparison. Sure, Peter's gaze carried its own kind of intensity, but it was different—less… like *that.*

Honestly, it was strange to see the faces of his friends reflected in the gods' features around him. But whether he liked it or not, they were their parents, and the resemblance left no room for doubt.

The blood didn't lie.

With a sharp crack, Zeus slammed his master bolt against the ground. The sound sliced through the air like a whip, instantly silencing the room. He followed it with a commanding

gesture, signaling everyone to prepare for the emergency meeting—a motion that left no room for argument.

Hastily, Chiron guided Luke toward the center of the room, with Mr. D trailing behind at a slower, almost reluctant pace. The thrones curved in a semicircle around them, creating the unsettling sensation that every god's gaze was fixed squarely on Luke from every angle. The weight of their attention pressed down on him, suffocating, like an iron collar clamped tight around his neck.

A cold sweat prickled along his skin.

Beside him, Luke heard his uncle let out a long, exasperated sigh, followed by a sharp huff. Mr. D shot Zeus an annoyed glance, the King of the Gods returning it with a sternness so pointed it felt personal. With a subtle roll of his eyes, Dionysus gave Luke a light pat on the back before dragging his feet toward his throne. He moved so sluggishly that Luke couldn't tell if he was bored or simply done with the whole ordeal.

Without thinking, Luke's hand darted out, catching the edge of his uncle's suit jacket.

Mr. D stopped mid-step, his brows furrowing as he turned to look at Luke. For a brief moment, his expression softened. There was something in his face—concern, maybe, or something close to it.

The gesture had been instinctive, reflexive—childish. Realization hit Luke a beat later, and mortification swept over him. He yanked his hand back as though burned, his ears burning with embarrassment.

*I can't believe I just did that—right now, with everyone watching. Oh God, I look like a little kid. No one's ever going to take me seriously again.*

Heat crawled up his neck, his stomach churning as he cast a cautious sideways glance, bracing himself for ridicule or judgment.

What caught his attention instead was his father.

Hermes' eyes were locked on him, narrowed and faintly glowing. His hands gripped the arms of his throne so tightly his knuckles gleamed white. Beside him, Apollo leaned in, his grin dazzling enough to sell toothpaste, whispering something Luke couldn't hear.

Whatever it was earned Apollo a sharp glare from Hermes, who only tightened his grip on the marble throne, his fingers pressing into it as if he might crack it under the strain.

Then Hermes noticed Luke watching.

For a second, his expression faltered, but then he turned his head sharply, as though something else in the corner of the room suddenly demanded his attention. The move was deliberate—too obvious to feel natural. If Hermes had truly wanted to be subtle, Luke knew he could have been. Trickery and subtlety were second nature to him.

No, Hermes wanted Luke to notice.

And the way he did it—almost sulky—left Luke completely flabbergasted.

“Lucy,” Mr. D called, snapping Luke out of his thoughts.

His uncle hesitated for a moment, his hand resting briefly on Luke’s shoulder as he whispered, “Luke, you’ll be fine. This’ll be quick, everything will be fine.”

Before Luke could respond, Dionysus turned and walked toward his throne, the one draped in grapevines. With each step, he seemed to grow taller, his form expanding until he filled the seat properly. Then, with an air of dramatic indifference, he slouched into it, sprawling in a way that was both languid and entirely theatrical.

Beside Luke, Chiron stepped closer, standing quietly at his side, offering silent support. It was a small comfort, a reminder that he wasn’t entirely alone in this. Still, the earlier assurances that Chiron would take the lead weren’t exactly reassuring. Luke was the only one who truly knew what had happened with the barriers—the *only* witness. He had no doubt he’d be interrogated. *Thoroughly.*

He could only hope Chiron would serve as a decent buffer, enough to make the ordeal even remotely bearable.

But Luke had no time to spiral into another round of imagined scenarios before a sharp crack thundered through the space, loud and deafening, like a storm breaking right beside his ear.

Rising from his throne, Zeus swept his gaze slowly across the room. The gesture, coming from a man as tall as a house with eyes that seemed to trap lightning, was profoundly intimidating. His piercing stare eventually landed on Luke, who instinctively crossed his arms behind his back, gripping his wrist tightly in a desperate attempt to mask how unnerved he felt. Zeus lingered on him for a moment longer before shifting his attention to Chiron and then addressing the room at large.

“Concerning news has come to our attention,” Zeus declared, his booming voice rolling through the hall like distant thunder. He paused, his gaze hardening as the air grew heavy, charged with static. The weight of his furious aura bore down on Luke, like the sky itself was collapsing onto his shoulders. His legs wavered under the pressure, leaving him tense and on edge.

With gritted teeth, Zeus continued, “Intruders have breached Camp Half-Blood—an unknown demigod, no less—and poisoned my *daughter’s* tree.”

Hera’s expression flickered for the briefest moment, her composure slipping just enough to betray a reaction. But almost instantly, her face smoothed back into an expression of stony indifference, as if sculpted from marble.

“They have poisoned the protections I placed on our children’s haven,” Zeus pressed on, his voice harsher now, “accomplishing the impossible—weakening wards that have held strong for eons.”

The room erupted. Voices clashed from all sides as the gods argued, disbelief and outrage surging over one another in a tide. Their auras crackled through the air, an overwhelming storm of power that left Luke barely standing. The sheer force of it made him want to collapse then and there.

But Chiron's hand gripped his arm, grounding him, pulling him back to reality. The touch steadied him, a silent reminder to breathe. Slowly, Luke began to center himself, recalling the calming techniques he'd practiced with Mr. D.

The reprieve didn't last long.

"*Silence!*" Zeus roared, his voice reverberating through the hall like the breaking of a storm. Lightning crackled through his hair, his eyes glowing dangerously. The clouds swirling around his throne darkened, churning into ominous black, flashing with bursts of electricity. The air grew heavier, suffocating under the weight of his fury, charged with the promise of an imminent storm.

One by one, the gods fell silent, the tide of voices ebbing until the room was calm once more —though it was a fragile calm, barely held in check.

Zeus held his narrowed gaze on the room for a moment longer before speaking again. "We will hear from the director and the witness. Then we, the Twelve Olympians, will decide what actions must be taken in response to this travesty."

Settling into his throne, his posture rigid, Zeus rested the master bolt heavily on his lap. Then his piercing gaze turned to Chiron. "Speak, Chiron."

Straightening at the call, Chiron dipped his chin respectfully. "It is an honor to stand before the revered *Theoi* once again, though," he hesitated, a faint regret threading through his words, "unfortunately, under less-than-ideal circumstances."

He crossed his arms behind his back, shedding the formalities as he moved to the heart of the matter.

Luke wished Chiron had skipped the formalities altogether. He knew respect was necessary, that Chiron was simply following protocol. But the restless stirring in his chest only grew. He longed for this meeting to be over, to retreat to his bed, bury the weight of it all under his blankets, and pretend things were fine.

But he couldn't pretend anymore. His eyes were wide open now.

"As the King said," Chiron continued, his tone deepening with seriousness, "Camp Half-Blood's barriers are in a state of decay. That's the best word I can find to describe it. After extensive study over the past few days, Mr. D and I have confirmed that the poison has spread from the King's daughter's tree."

He paused, his brow furrowing. "The poison seeped into the barriers through the tree's connection, which serves to reinforce them. But the substance itself… it is unlike anything I've encountered before."

Chiron's gaze shifted uneasily across the room before he finally spoke the dreaded words.

"We believe… it originated from Tartarus."

A heavy silence hung in the air, thick with tension, until Zeus, his brows deeply furrowed, asked in a voice low and strained, "Thalia's tree? What of her—its state?"

Hera's mouth twitched, forcing a smile that landed somewhere closer to a grimace. Her eyes flickered with something unreadable as she responded, her tone laced with a sharp edge. "My love, the matter at hand goes beyond a *mere* tree."

"Mere tree," Zeus repeated, his voice dangerously slow, his stony gaze shifting to Hera. To her credit, she met his glare without flinching, her expression inscrutable.

"Thalia's tree is being cared for to the best of our ability, Lord Zeus," Chiron interjected quickly, his voice calm but carrying a thread of urgency. "Its condition is stable for now and not worsening. I've applied every ounce of my medical knowledge, and the demigods of Cabin Seven and Four have been taking shifts monitoring it. We've exhausted all available resources, but the situation remains beyond our reach at present."

Zeus's piercing gaze returned to Chiron, his displeasure evident in the hard line of his mouth.

"I see," Zeus replied evenly. Then, after a pause, came the dreaded question Luke had foolishly hoped would go unasked.

"Tartarus poison and the weakening of wards that stood strong for centuries—wards I placed there myself. How did such an atrocity occur," his voice dropped, "right under your nose?"

Luke cast a glance at Chiron's profile out of the corner of his eye. The centaur's face was unreadable, as still and impassive as a marble statue.

"We, as previously stated, had complete trust in the strength of the barriers you placed yourself, King Zeus," Chiron began, slipping seamlessly into the kind of polished flattery that spoke of his long experience dealing with gods—and perhaps his lineage as Kronos's son. "We didn't anticipate such boldness, especially from an intruder daring enough to breach Camp Half-Blood, a place so hidden and well-protected."

"So you grew complacent," Zeus interrupted, his voice cold and sharp, each word cracking like thunder. "Allowing an intruder to slip through—a demigod, no less."

He leaned forward slightly, his grip tightening on the master bolt. The motion sent a chill through Luke, who couldn't help but wonder if Zeus was on the verge of smiting someone.

"Was it the same ones who stole from me before? The ones who dared to hide and turned their backs on the honored gods?" Zeus's electric-blue gaze bore into Chiron, crackling with anger. "Did you fail to seal the borders against them," he continued, his voice cutting like a blade, "after all they had done?"

"We have sealed them, King Zeus," Chiron replied, his voice steady and calm despite the tension. "This intruder is an unknown demigod—not one from Camp Half-Blood."

Luke couldn't help but feel a flicker of admiration for Chiron's composure. He knew he wouldn't have been able to keep his face so still, especially not with Zeus like this. His father was one thing, but Zeus? Zeus was something else entirely—an overwhelming presence that left no doubt in Luke's mind that even the smallest hint of disrespect would result in being obliterated on the spot.

"So, another failure," Zeus thundered, his words slicing through the air with the weight of a storm. The murmurs among the gods quieted as all eyes turned to him.

"Father," Dionysus drawled, his tone thick with disinterest as he lounged in his throne. He waved a lazy hand, though his sharp gaze betrayed the calm exterior. "My satyrs are doing the best they can."

"Clearly not enough," Zeus snapped, his fury barely restrained. His eyes sparked with lightning, his voice crackling with rage. "If a single demigod managed to bypass their senses and attack the Camp we so graciously bestowed upon their kind, then their best isn't good enough."

Dionysus's expression darkened, the vines coiled around his throne twisting and writhing like agitated snakes. Despite the outward calm of his posture, the tension radiating from him was undeniable.

Watching him, Luke had a sudden, fleeting thought: *He was mortal once. He went to Camp Half-Blood, too.*

But he didn't have time to dwell on that.

Zeus's sharp gaze snapped back to him. The air seemed to hum with electricity, heavy and *suffocating.*

"We have a witness. Someone who saw the intruder during the event and was the only one to act." Zeus voice rose, booming through the hall. "Tell us, Luke Castellan—what happened?"

Every god's gaze turned to Luke, their stares pressing down on him like a physical weight. It was heavy, suffocating, and expectant. Their eyes were unblinking, studying him as though he were some rare bird trapped in a cage, exposed and vulnerable.

Luke stood frozen, the silence around him crushing. His tongue felt leaden, as if stitched to the roof of his mouth. His eyes darted nervously between the gods.

Ares leaned forward slightly, hulking and menacing, the weight of his scrutiny burning into Luke. Athena, sharp and calculating, studied him with the kind of focus that made him feel like a puzzle she was already halfway through solving. Apollo's dazzling smile seemed almost mocking, while Aphrodite toyed with her hair, her smirk playful and unnervingly intent.

His father, Hermes, remained unreadable, his face set and hard. Yet Luke noticed the subtle glances Hermes cast toward the other gods—quick—before his attention returned to him, more guarded each time.

It was Mr. D who finally cut through the haze. He met Luke's eyes with a look that was almost bored, but his fingers twitched in a small, deliberate motion that seemed to say, *Breathe.*

Chiron stepped closer—not enough to touch, but enough to remind Luke he wasn't alone. His quiet presence was steadying, a reassurance that anchored Luke just enough to push through.

And that was all it took to break the silence.

Luke's words came out stuttered and awkward, his voice betraying his nerves. He cursed himself internally for sounding so uncertain, but anything was better than silence. His tongue tripped over the words, his thoughts scrambling to align.

"I—I was patrolling the barriers alone," he began. "It was a normal day, middle of the afternoon. Most people were on their free time." His fingers twitched at his sides, and he shifted uncomfortably.

"I was heading back to my cabin when I saw a pack of monsters. They weren't particularly strong, but there were… a lot of them. That's what caught my attention. It didn't seem right."

He hesitated, the memory flashing vividly in his mind.

"So I stayed and watched. That's when I saw… someone. Not a monster, but a person. They were right in the middle of the pack, moving fast—too fast—straight toward the barriers."

Swallowing hard, he added, his voice slightly stronger this time, "So I engaged."

"You said you were patrolling alone?"

Athena's voice cut through the air, sharp and precise, commanding his attention like a blade drawn in the dark. Luke's gaze snapped to her, meeting her stony, unyielding expression. She looked every inch the war general: dignified, serious, and utterly without warmth.

Her pale skin was like marble—cold, unblemished, and unyielding. For a fleeting moment, Ryan's coldness flickered in Luke's mind. Even the little snake had a hint of warmth in the caramel tone of his hair or the heat of his anger. But Athena? She was nothing but sharp edges.

Her piercing gray eyes—far colder than her children's—seemed to dissect him, brighter and harder, like polished steel. Controlled, yet no less dangerous.

Her jet-black hair was braided in an intricate, disciplined style, half-loose down her back, and she wore a flowing gray dress. A gleaming golden breastplate rested across her chest, more than an accessory—it looked like armor. Beside her throne sat the Aegis, its polished surface catching the light. The Medusa face etched into it was unmistakable, its frozen snarl twisting Luke's stomach.

Instinctive fear crawled over his skin, and he fought to suppress a shiver, forcing himself to stay still, to not flinch under its gaze.

“Y-yes, I was patrolling alone,” Luke stammered, his voice faltering under the weight of her piercing gaze. He paused, then corrected himself, his words shrinking further. “Well, I had my hellhound with me—but I was the only demigod.”

“I see,” Athena murmured, her fingers tapping rhythmically against the arms of her throne. Her voice remained neutral, but her next question struck sharp and deliberate. “And what of the others, little hero? What compelled you to take on such a task alone?”

Luke opened his mouth, but no words came out. His mind raced, scrambling to craft an answer that might satisfy the goddess—something other than the truth of his own paranoia, something that wouldn’t implicate the younger campers. His fingers twitched at his sides, and after a moment of hesitation, he cast a glance toward Chiron.

The centaur gave him a small, reassuring nod before stepping in to take over.

“Luke is our oldest camper,” Chiron began, his tone calm and steady. “He takes his responsibility to protect the younger demigods very seriously. After last year’s… incident, he took it upon himself to patrol the barriers. A number of the others have started doing the same under his guidance.”

Athena’s sharp eyes flicked to Chiron, her fingers pausing mid-tap. She tilted her head slightly, her expression unchanging as she absorbed his words.

“But not all,” she observed, her voice as sharp as a blade. Her piercing gray eyes seemed to glow brighter, the weight of her words settling heavily in the room, laden with unspoken accusations.

The silence that followed was thick and oppressive, broken only by Zeus’s thunderous voice cutting through it like a storm.

“Why were you the only demigod making such an effort after it became known that there were deserters, Luke Castellan?”

Chiron started to speak, but Zeus silenced him with a sharp wave of his hand, his piercing gaze locked on Luke as he barked, “I want to hear it from him.”

“I—I,” Luke stammered, his gaze darting nervously around the room. His chest felt tight, his heart pounding so hard it seemed to echo in his ears.

“I chose to do this alone, King Zeus,” he finally said, his voice trembling but just steady enough to continue. “After… after some of our own were revealed to have joined the enemy, I became wary. I felt it was my responsibility.”

He hesitated, glancing at Chiron for reassurance before pressing on.

“The others had faith in the barriers.”

Realizing how his words might be interpreted, he quickly added, “And I—I did, too. Truly. But demigods can pass through them, and I thought…”

“My son was simply being prudent,” Hermes interjected, his tone deceptively light, though the sharpness in his gaze as it flicked to Chiron was unmistakable. “The real question,” he continued, his smile curving in a way that made Luke’s stomach twist, “is why that same prudence didn’t extend to those in charge.” He tilted his head slightly, his words turning pointed. “Eons spent training heroes, Chiron, and yet… you failed to foresee this?”

*What.*

*No, no, no, this isn’t helping, Father,* Luke thought, panic flaring in his chest as he watched the atmosphere in the room shift dangerously.

All the gods turned their attention to the centaur, their gazes narrowing in silent judgment. Up in their thrones, the King and Queen’s expressions shifted—subtle, but enough to make the air feel heavy, like a blade poised above their heads, waiting for the slightest wrong move.

“Don’t be absurd, Hermes,” Mr. D snapped, straightening in his seat, the vines of his throne lashing like enraged snakes. “We’d already expelled those thieves, and this—this was a demigod none of us have seen before, not one from *my* Camp.” His eyes glowed a menacing purple as his voice rose. “Are you suggesting we start banning every unknown demigod from Camp? Our children?”

The gods erupted into a whirlwind of arguments, each defending their children and insisting that such betrayal could never come from their own line. Voices overlapped, and a cacophony of accusations filled the air.

But then Dionysus’ voice cut through the chaos, sharper than before and laced with venom. “And wasn’t it one of *yours* who started all of this?”

Hermes’ face darkened, his eyes flashing with fury as he gripped his caduceus tightly. “That was an unclaimed demigod, not one of mine.”

Luke’s chest constricted, the sting of betrayal slicing through him like a blade. *How could he say that?*

Chris was his brother. Luke *knew* it, and so did Hermes—judging by how his father deliberately avoided meeting his eyes, turning his gaze elsewhere as if pretending Luke wasn’t even there.

“Shifting your own blame now, little brother?” Hermes pressed on, his tone growing colder with each word. “As we all know, you’re in charge of Camp Half-Blood. What do you have to say for yourself and your failure to protect your charges?”

The smile twisting across his father’s face was devoid of warmth, his voice dripping with mock curiosity. “Does it deserve another fifty years tacked onto your punishment?”

“You—” Mr. D snarled, and in an instant, the vines around him exploded. The sound was accompanied by a loud crack and a blinding flash of light.

Luke winced, blinking rapidly as the sting of the light left him momentarily half-blind. When his vision cleared, the remains of the vines hung scorched and limp. Dionysus sat in his throne, sulking, while Hermes wore a triumphant smirk, his smug glance practically radiating satisfaction.

"*Enough,*" Zeus commanded, his hand lowering from where it had been raised.

For a long moment, silence stretched across the room. Zeus stood still, his imposing figure casting a long shadow. His piercing gaze drifted across the chamber, briefly landing on Luke and Chiron before continuing its sweep.

He stroked his beard thoughtfully, his expression unreadable. Beside him, Hera leaned in and whispered something into his ear. His eyes narrowed, considering her words, before he gave a single, curt nod. Then, with a sharp motion, he slammed the master bolt against the ground. The sound echoed through the hall like a thunderclap, commanding the gods' undivided attention.

"I have heard your explanations, your complaints, and the witness," Zeus declared, his voice sharp and resolute. "Now, we will decide what must be done."

"Father, our high and mighty king," Athena began, her tone calm and measured as she clasped her hands neatly in her lap. "I propose we assign groups of demigods to patrol the borders while we investigate the nature of this poison."

Her gaze shifted, lingering on Hera. "As for the *security guard*… perhaps it is time for Argus to return to the Queen's entourage and serve her once more. I trust such a change would not be unwelcome. It might even serve as a reminder of his duties—and the significance of fulfilling them."

"A fine suggestion, my child. It shall be done," Zeus declared, brushing off the sharp look Hera cast his way. His attention shifted to Chiron, his gaze cutting.

"Yet we must also address the matter of accountability—this lapse in vigilance that allowed an intruder to breach our defenses and weaken barriers that have withstood the ages. Perhaps it is time to consider a new activities director, after all these years."

No. This couldn't be happening.

The idea of kicking Chiron out as the activities director—this was unacceptable. It wasn't his fault. No one was to blame but Kronos, and even the gods shared part of that burden.

Gathering his courage, Luke straightened up, ready to speak, but Chiron's grip on his arm was firm, keeping him in place. The centaur didn't look at him, his eyes trained ahead, his expression calm and composed, a stark contrast to the storm brewing in Luke's chest.

Luke's gaze flicked briefly to Mr. D, who wore a tight frown, his lips pressed together in visible irritation. Their eyes met, and Mr. D gave a subtle shake of his head. The silent message was clear—*keep quiet.*

Soon, the gods began to vote.

“I find this completely unfair,” Apollo said, waving a hand through the air with theatrical flair. “Chiron’s been a good friend and a dedicated teacher to my children for centuries. He doesn’t deserve this.”

“So do I,” Artemis added firmly.

“Well, *I* vote for the substitution,” Aphrodite chimed in, her voice sweet and melodic as she lazily twirled a lock of her hair around her finger. She seemed almost bored, but her eyes—flickering through shifting shades like a kaleidoscope—sharpened for a brief moment.

With a dramatic sigh, she tilted her head, flashing a coy smile. “The poor mortals. Don’t you think they deserve someone who actually cares enough to remember to check the barriers?”

Her words hung in the air, saccharine and venomous all at once, sparking murmurs among the gods as they deliberated.

Mr. D’s voice rang out next, predictable in its disdain as he voted against the substitution, his tone thick with irritation. But as the votes were cast, one by one, it became painfully clear that the majority leaned toward replacing Chiron.

Until only one vote remained. His father’s.

Luke’s heart hammered in his chest, his pulse loud in his ears as he turned toward Hermes. His eyes searched his father’s face, desperate for any sign—any flicker—that this time might be different. That, for once, his father might stand with him.

But Hermes’ expression was cold and unreadable, his face a blank slate. His gaze flicked away for a fraction of a second, and Luke swore he caught a glimpse of something—something fleeting, impossible to place—but it vanished before he could make sense of it.

“I vote for the substitution,” Hermes said flatly, his tone devoid of emotion.

Luke’s chest constricted, and his heart shattered.

The rest of the meeting passed in a blur. The words that followed, the formalities and declarations, were little more than background noise to him. He went through the motions, numb, the weight in his chest suffocating. He barely registered the gods leaving one by one, murmurs of conversation filling the space as they departed.

From the corner of his eye, Luke saw Apollo stand up, glowing faintly as if he were the sun itself, commanding attention without even trying. But instead of leaving with the others, he made his way toward Luke, his swagger unmistakable—self-assured and brimming with that air of self-importance Luke had always associated with him from the books.

*What does he want?*

Before Apollo could get too close, however, Hermes stepped in. Subtle as the movement was, it was enough to block the path. Hermes’ smile was quick, almost apologetic, but the

sharpness in his eyes was unmistakable.

Hermes spoke to Apollo, the words too distant for Luke to catch. Whatever was said, though, struck a nerve. Apollo's expression soured, his golden glow dimming slightly as his posture stiffened. He glared at Hermes for a beat longer, then turned away without another word.

The two gods disappeared together, leaving only a faint trace of energy where they had stood.

"Luke."

Chiron's voice drew Luke's attention away from the now-empty spot, and guilt hit him like a punch to the chest.

"I'm sorry," Luke blurted, looking up at the centaur. "I shouldn't have said those things. I should've kept quiet—or chosen my words better. Then you wouldn't be replaced."

The centaur's expression softened. "This isn't your fault, Luke. They asked, and you couldn't remain silent. All you did was speak the truth."

He let out a weary sigh, his posture drooping as though centuries of burdens had finally settled on his shoulders. In a quiet, almost broken voice, he added, "We should have listened to you."

Luke stayed silent. He couldn't disagree, but the damage was already done, and saying anything more wouldn't fix it. Instead, he reached out, patting Chiron's arm awkwardly—an attempt at comfort, trying to return a fraction of the kindness the centaur had shown him earlier.

Chiron gave him a small, grateful smile before his gaze shifted, looking past Luke. Turning to follow it, Luke saw Mr. D striding toward them, his expression thunderous.

The sight made Chiron sigh heavily.

"Well," the centaur said, straightening, though the weight of the situation was evident in his voice, "we'll have to deal with the aftermath now. I'll still be around for some time until they appoint someone new. If we're fortunate, Mr. D can find a replacement the gods will accept —someone who won't make things worse for you children."

"But… you'll come back, right?" Luke asked, his voice small, hesitant. "After things calm down?"

Chiron met his eyes with a soft, sad smile just as Mr. D reached them. The god wasted no time; with a sharp snap of his fingers, they were back at Camp Half-Blood, standing in the Big House's living room.

Mr. D dropped heavily into a chair, his elbows braced on his knees. For once, his expression was serious—his usual air of apathy replaced with a sharp focus that felt out of place on him.

"We need to figure out how to get Chiron back where he belongs. I won't tolerate some new, undoubtedly incompetent little upstart the others will inevitably dig up—one who, I might

add, won’t even know how to play pinochle like a civilized person.”

Chapter End Notes

Well, Chiron and Argus got fired.

Really, someone had to take the blame for this whole situation since it’s a serious issue, and nobody in charge did anything (including the gods). So, if we think about it, it was a systemic issue. Athena was very pointed with her questioning, but it felt like a turning point in a way.

Anyway, Luke is all prettied up and dressed similarly to Mercury, lol. Inês, Drew, and Silena prettied him up. Mercury would absolutely love to see it.

As for the gods—well, they’re all here, voting and being godly and all that. Whether they take the situation more seriously and actually do something remains up in the air. (Don’t forget, there’s godly politics behind all this, including the involvement of the minor gods…)

Hermes is sulking here, trying to protect his son, and even gets into a fight with Mr. D. In any case, I think this passage hints at the politics going on behind the scenes.

And Aphrodite—the blonde mentioned there is Luke’s mom. For me, platonic love counts as much as romantic love. She seems like she’s just acting on a whim, not giving it much thought, but she’s more than she seems, lol.

Then there’s Mr. D, trying to get Chiron to stay. That won’t happen, though, not with all the gods voting for it. Mr. D is just one god, but you can bet he’s going to do something…

Thanks for reading! Comments are always appreciated, and it doesn’t matter if you’re late to the party. If you’re interested, I share art on Tumblr (mnz-10)! (I made one! Though I don’t know how to use it well, lol.)

So, what do you guys think Mr. D will do?

# Chapter 48: SoM - Patrols

Chapter Summary

> Patrolling with Inês, as always, turns into an event. Then they get to work, and something leaves Luke worried. Soon after, he gives his report to Chiron and Mr. D.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The borders seemed even worse when Luke really paid attention.

As he stood there with Cabin Ten and his own, he couldn't help but notice how lifeless everything seemed. The once-bright green leaves and grass were now dull, brown, and nearly rotting. An uneasy air hung over the place, something strange that settled deep in his bones.

But worst of all was Thalia's tree.

His eyes darted to it again, just to reassure himself it was still standing.

Its trunk seemed to be peeling, the bark curling away like old paint. Leaves drifted down steadily, as if it were winter—but they looked sick, riddled with holes and stained with an unnatural purplish hue. Poison, he knew.

*Tartarus poison.*

It was slowly killing the tree from the inside, making it sick and rotting away—a cruel fate. Chiron had told him as much when he asked, his face etched with worry and sorrow. Luke couldn't help but feel it too. Thalia had lived so briefly, hunted by monsters, and killed just steps from safety, sacrificing herself to protect those she loved. Her sacrifice had been *honored* by turning her into a tree, her energy feeding the barrier.

But now… now she was being destroyed again.

Biting his lip, he stared across the barrier, trying to push away the tightness in his chest, though his thoughts wouldn't quiet—not with how bad things were.

In any case, while the situation was bad, it was lucky Zeus hadn't seen the true state of his daughter's tree. If he had… well, it didn't bear thinking about. Without his interference, though, they still had a chance to make plans to get Chiron back in charge. Luke suspected the King of the Gods had only been looking for a scapegoat to appease the other Olympians—and maybe to satisfy himself a little. That much was clear from Zeus's reaction when they first relayed the news, his expression hardening after asking about Thalia's tree and hearing Chiron admit they didn't know how to deal with the poison.

Still, he doubted Zeus actually thought Chiron was somehow responsible—though that might have been a different story if he'd seen the tree for himself. For now, though, Luke didn't think Zeus was truly that angry. *Maybe.* Honestly, it felt more like a show of strength than genuine fury, like a little pissy fit or something close to it.

That gave Luke hope. Their plan could work—probably would, even. At least Mr. D seemed convinced of it, but, for now, they were still stuck in the planning stages with nothing to show for it.

One thing, at least, had been settled: Athena's suggestion—or, more accurately, her order—to organize demigod patrols along the weakened borders had been put into action almost immediately. Chiron had been—still was, really—on the verge of tearing his hair out, juggling rotations, cabin sizes, and schedules to make it all run smoothly.

And, somehow, it was working. So, there was that.

Some demigods got pissy about the whole thing, while others were eager to help, but everyone understood it was necessary. Any complaints were more grumbling than genuine objections. Nobody was stupid, and everyone was scared—especially with Argus being fired and sent back to Hera's entourage. That left patrolling the borders as something only they could do, which, ironically, gave everyone a newfound appreciation for the giant. Not that Luke felt too bad for him; Argus was probably more than fine under Hera's wings. He'd even gotten off without punishment, probably because no one wanted to risk pissing the Queen off.

By the day after the meeting, patrols were already in full swing. Word had spread—well, part of it, anyway. They'd kept certain details, especially anything about Chiron, under wraps. Revealing too much too soon would only fuel more panic, and panic wouldn't help anyone.

For now, keeping everyone focused on the patrols was the priority.

So here he was, standing alongside Inês as they watched the other side of the barrier. A scattering of monsters lingered there—weak ones, thankfully. The stronger ones seemed to be keeping their distance or weren't interested, though he doubted how much truth there was to that comforting thought.

"They're getting bolder," his friend commented, her gaze locked on the borders, her face taking on an uncharacteristically serious expression—at least to anyone who wasn't familiar with her.

Inês was head counselor too, one of the oldest demigods at Camp. There was more to her than the clown or the air-headed flirt. In fact, that went for all of Cabin Ten. Hell, their mother was *Aphrodite.* Anyone who saw them as nothing more than what they seemed was either clueless about self-preservation or too blinded by their own biases to see the truth.

Following her gaze, Luke watched as the monsters edged closer, some daring enough to test the borders. He narrowed his eyes, a sharp jolt of fury coursing through him.

He had been weak. He'd let the intruder slip through, and now they were paying for it.

*His kids were at risk.*

Luke clenched his fists, his shoulders tightening with the tension building inside him. His eyes never left the monsters outside, his blood boiling as the urge to charge, to drive those pests back to Tartarus, grew like a volcano ready to erupt.

It built and built, swelling within him until he felt like he might explode. The need to move, to fight, consumed him. Without thinking, he stepped forward—but a firm hand on his arm stopped him.

The touch yanked him back to reality, the monster inside him retreating just enough for him to blink and refocus. He turned his head to meet Inês's serious eyes, her hand holding him back with surprising strength.

For a moment, they just stood there, staring at each other.

Inês studied his face, carefully, *thoroughly,* reading him in a way that probably went deeper—and more truly—than he could understand himself. It was almost funny, in a way. She probably knew what he was feeling better than he did at this point.

What did she see in him now?

Was he a ball of uncontrollable rage, or something sorrowful and broken? Was he himself, or something else entirely—something unrecognizable even to him?

If he was being honest, he'd gotten worse. So much worse that sometimes, Luke couldn't even recognize himself anymore—especially in those moments when emotion overtook him. It was like he was just a vessel for something ugly that stirred within him—something that didn't quite feel like it belonged. He hoped it wasn't really him. He didn't want to be like that, but this life had changed him, hadn't it?

"Calm?" Inês asked after a beat, her voice steady, though her hands slowly pulled away from him, almost hesitant to let him go. She kept her gaze on him, her face shifting from its serious focus to something more concerned as the anger inside him faded, leaving behind a hollow exhaustion, a kind of emptiness.

*Tired.* Luke was tired.

Sighing deeply, Luke dragged a hand down his face and muttered, "I'm fine."

Inês didn't look particularly convinced. She probably sensed the storm of emotions churning beneath his skin, emotions he could barely keep in check. Lying to her wasn't really an option—not that it ever was, really. But she only gave him a brief glance before humming quietly and changing the subject.

Thankfully.

"Have you chosen someone to train as the next head counselor? A second-in-command?" Inês asked, glancing over her shoulder. Luke followed her gaze instinctively.

Behind them, their cabins were mingling—or at least some of them were. He spotted Silena with Drew, the older girl keeping a watchful eye on her siblings while Drew spoke about something, her brows furrowed like she was deep in thought. Nearby, his brothers, the Stolls, prowled restlessly. Luke made a mental note to keep an eye on them before they found a way to get into trouble.

The rest sat scattered on the ground, exhaustion etched into their faces as they watched the barriers with quiet unease. The constant patrols were beginning to weigh on them all.

As he watched the children, he answered, "No." He took a deep breath, his voice heavy with weariness. "I haven't. There's no one who fits. The…"

He cut himself off, the words hanging heavy in the air. Turning his gaze away sharply, he clicked his tongue, the tightness in his chest returning with a vengeance.

"I chose Silena as my successor," Inês said suddenly, taking control of the conversation. Luke was grateful—he didn't want to continue. His cabin had been hit the hardest by all of this, and he couldn't bring himself to dwell on the ones who had left.

"Already?" he asked, turning to her, his tone laced with faint surprise.

"The time has come," she said, her gaze fixed on her younger sisters. Her expression was serious, and after a brief pause, she pressed her lips together and added, "I'm getting old, and my time here is almost up."

"You don't have to leave, you know," Luke said quietly.

"I know," she replied, pausing for a moment. Then, with a soft sigh, she continued, "It's just… I miss home. I miss my father too."

For all that it made him sad, Luke couldn't say he didn't understand. But unlike him—who missed a time and people he could never see again, even if he returned to his homeland—Inês still had someone waiting for her.

"But is that wise?" he asked, his hand tightening around the hilt of the sword at his hip, his thumb brushing over the handle's familiar contours. It felt as though his hand had shaped itself to it, the weapon so well-used in the past few days—more than it had been in *years*. "You'd be outside our safety network, closer to the gods' homeland. You know what that means—more monsters. Stronger ones."

The closer one got to Greece, the more monsters appeared—everyone knew that. It was something they were taught early, cautionary tales thrown around as warnings to keep them from straying too far. True, the gods were stronger there, likely more present too, if Luke had to guess. After all, it was their origin—their culture, their people, their traditions. Greece held the original Olympus, their true home and center of power, if he was remembering Mr. D's words right.

But the monsters, born from the same myths and roots, were stronger there too.

It was always a trade-off, and, as usual, it was the demigods who ended up paying the price.

With a deep sigh, Inês nodded. “I know. I’m still thinking about it.” Her gaze shifted to her cabin, and she added, “They still need me, and Silena’s nowhere near ready to take over, so…”

Then, that familiar glint appeared in her eyes—the clownish one Luke knew all too well. He rolled his eyes inwardly, already preparing himself for whatever nonsense she was about to say.

Sure enough, she turned to him with a sly smile. “Don’t worry, I’m not leaving you *that* soon.”

Rolling his eyes, though unable to suppress the small smile tugging at his lips, Luke shot back, “And here I thought it wasn’t about me, but all your little escapades keeping you here.”

Inês huffed through her nose, her eyes narrowing at him before letting out a dramatic harrumph and turning her head to the side in exaggerated offense. Luke wasn’t fooled. She wasn’t irritated—not really. The quick glance she gave him out of the corner of her eye said it all: she was relieved.

Which probably meant she was about to start talking about *feelings*—she was like that, a little scoundrel who laid traps to make him comfortable before hitting him with deep conversations. Like some prototype therapist. And he already had Uncle D doing that job; he didn’t need another, more annoying version on top of it.

“So…” he trailed off, his eyes shifting away in an attempt to steer her away from the inevitable emotional ambush. He *really* wasn’t in the mood to talk about his problems. His gaze landed on Silena, and a question popped into his head. “How was the succession decided in Cabin Ten?”

The way Inês narrowed her eyes at him told Luke she wasn’t fooled by his clumsy—he could admit it wasn’t his best—attempt to change the subject. Still, she took a deep breath, as if summoning patience, and shook her head like he was the most troublesome person alive. But, judging by her resigned expression, she’d decided to let it go.

How undignified. Luke was perfectly civilized and easy to deal with. She was the clown, not him.

“It was decided by me laying out the possible candidates, others volunteering themselves, and then everyone voting,” she explained with a shrug. “Obviously, the one I picked was already the favorite my siblings were leaning toward.” She pursed her lips, adding, “Though, of course, there were some complaints.” She coughed and muttered, “Drew,” before continuing as if she hadn’t said anything. “But Silena won, and everyone agreed she was the best choice. She’s well-liked in the cabin and probably the nicest of all of us.”

She paused, seeming to struggle for the right words before finally saying, “She’s just… *nice.* She breaks every tradition and still manages to be so *Foam-Born.”* A small smile

tugged at her lips as she glanced at her sister's direction. "She's braver than I am. She'll make a great head counselor."

"I agree."

To be so Foam-Born… Luke wondered what that really meant to Cabin Ten. The phrase lingered in his mind, pulling him back to the Olympian meeting—and to *Aphrodite.*

It made him wonder how someone like Silena could be her daughter. They were so different. Aphrodite had seemed so… detached during the meeting, voting against Chiron staying as activities director and referring to them, her demigod children, as *poor mortals,* like they were little more than pets. Around Camp, there were plenty of whispers about how she forgot her children, and looking at Silena, Luke couldn't see how someone so kind and thoughtful could come from a mother like that.

But then there was that moment—a split second when Aphrodite's eyes had sharpened, when she'd seemed genuinely engaged before slipping back into her distant, disinterested demeanor.

Luke didn't know what to make of it.

Just like he didn't know what to make of what he'd seen when he'd looked at her. He knew from the books that she was supposed to appear as what someone loved or found most attractive, but for a brief, fleeting second, he thought he'd seen something else—something beyond that. Something that struck him so deeply it lingered for days afterward.

*Passion.*

At least, that's what he thought it was. But *how?*

"Well, as much as I enjoy a break and catching up on the gossip," Inês remarked with a tired drawl, her words dragging him out of his thoughts, "we should probably deal with those little stragglers before the next patrol group gets here."

Pursing his lips, Luke sighed before nodding. He raised his fingers to his mouth and let out a sharp, piercing whistle that instantly snapped his little hellions to attention. Over time, he'd trained them to respond to a variety of whistles, creating a system so intricate it could probably qualify as a language. Its primary purpose, though, was simple—to prepare them for moments like this, whether during mock battles like Capture the Flag or real threats, like now.

Of course, he was certain his brats used it for less-than-honorable purposes. He just *knew* they did.

Soon, they were lining up, unusually organized for a change, and Luke couldn't help the flicker of pride that rose as they formed a neat row near him. The Stoll brothers stood closest, of course, with Chiara scowling nearby, and the rest surprisingly well-behaved for once.

Luke's gaze swept over them, instinctively counting heads to ensure everyone was present—a habit so ingrained it barely registered anymore. Satisfied, he turned his attention to Inês, who was doing the same with her cabin. Once she was finished, she glanced at him, gave a firm nod, then snapped her fingers and spoke loudly.

"Listen up! This is our last patrol of the day!"

Instantly, the kids erupted into cheers, their voices loud and chaotic, until Inês clapped her hands sharply. Gradually, the noise died down, and she continued.

"So, before the next group gets here, let's clear the perimeter. These little monsters are weak, and we *definitely* don't want Cabins Four and Seven racking up more tallies than us, do we?"

"No!" the kids shouted in unison.

The friendly competition they'd created when the patrols began seemed to be working. The tiredness Luke had seen earlier evaporated, replaced by a fierce glint of competitiveness in their eyes. It was funny, in a way, to see how quickly they rallied, but Luke knew he had to step in to remind them to be careful.

Weak or not, monsters were still monsters, and some of these demigods were young. With so many threats lingering around, accidents were always a possibility.

"Stay close and keep your eyes sharp! The monsters are weak, but there are plenty of them," Luke said firmly, his gaze sweeping over the group. He watched as their excitement settled, giving way to a steadier, more focused energy.

Satisfied, he drew his sword, glancing at Inês and catching her approving nod. Just before crossing the barrier, he paused and looked back at them. Letting himself be playful for once—just to lighten the mood—he called, "Remember your training, and let's rack up enough points to finally one-up Cabin Five!"

As he crossed the barrier, he heard the kids cheer again. Luke rolled his eyes, but a faint smile crept onto his face.

Kids were so simple, really. Still, he couldn't deny that getting first place sounded pretty good to him too.

Almost without thinking, he swept his sword in a smooth, casual motion, slicing through a hound with barely a glance in its direction. His brows furrowed slightly as he scanned the area, searching for anything too much for the kids to handle—something more suited to his level. But it seemed they were managing just fine, holding their own against the wild dogs and goblin-like creatures with surprising ease.

Then he looked up.

*Stymphalian Birds.*

His stomach tightened at the sight. Metallic wings glinted in the light as sharp-beaked creatures circled above, firing razor-sharp feathers down toward the ground.

The birds weren't much of a threat *yet,* but if their numbers grew, it could quickly turn into a disaster.

Luke forced his thoughts into focus, scanning the crowd for Inês. His eyes caught on his brothers first, taking turns baiting monsters into carefully laid traps set up by the rest of the cabin. Chiara stood nearby, her focus sharp as she manipulated probabilities to tilt things in their favor.

Off to the side, he spotted Drew sticking close to her more physically adept siblings—Silena in particular. Drew's charmspeak left the monsters dazed, drawing them in like a siren luring sailors to their doom. Silena, in turn, wielded her spear with precision, her strikes clean and efficient as she swiftly cut through the monsters.

Luke took note of her technique in the back of his mind. Her form wasn't perfect, but for her age, it was impressive—better than good.

But he refocused when he finally spotted who he'd been searching for. Inês stood nearby, her head tilted as she stared up at the same sight he had noticed. Then, as if sensing his gaze, she turned, locking eyes with him, her expression serious.

With a silent signal, they moved at the same time, no words needed. They both knew what had to be done—working together to protect the younger ones from the danger above.

Rushing ahead, Luke used his momentum to leap over a cluster of goblin-like creatures, planting a foot on one of their heads as a makeshift stepping stone. Launching himself into the air, he twisted his body mid-roll, his sword sweeping in wide arcs. A flurry of gold dust spun around him as his blade cut through several of the birds.

*Not all of them,* he noted as his feet hit the ground again. But that wasn't entirely a bad thing. The remaining birds, moving like a single, collective creature, turned their beady, hate-filled eyes on him. Their grudge felt personal, and in the back of his mind, it reminded him of crows.

Luke twisted sharply, darting away from the kids and pulling the birds' attention farther from the barriers. He dodged the ones diving toward him with practiced ease, using the openings to cut down a few more. He trusted Inês to take care of the rest, confident she could handle it while the bulk of the threat stayed zeroed in on him.

It was trust well-placed.

Shrieks rang out behind him, drawing some of the birds' attention, and soon enough they were caught in a conundrum over who to go after. Luke smirked, sharp and mean, as he watched them hesitate. They'd dropped lower in their attempts to get close enough to stab holes in him with their beaks, but that only made them easier targets—for both him and Inês.

Before long, they were both fully immersed in the fight, cutting and slashing through the chaos. Luke, being the faster of the two, focused on slamming down the ones trying to escape, forcing them back to the ground, while Inês dealt with the ones that fought back. Her

movements were elegant, her spear twisting as she cut them down, always keeping herself just out of range of their sharp edges thanks to the weapon's reach.

Still, not all the Stymphalian Birds could be stopped. A handful managed to break away, their metallic wings flashing as they vanished into the sky.

Catching his breath, Luke wiped golden dust from his face, his eyes narrowing as he watched the fleeing birds grow smaller in the distance. "These monsters aren't a good sign," he muttered darkly. "I've got a bad feeling this won't be the last time we see them—or that it'll be in numbers this small."

"We'll manage, just like we did now," Inês replied, though there was a flicker of uncertainty in her expression as her gaze lingered on the horizon. After a moment, she shook her head, forcing herself to focus back on the kids and mustering a smile. "We handled these ones well enough. The kids did too—look."

She gestured behind them, where the battlefield was now clear of monsters. The kids, though visibly tired, looked immensely pleased with themselves. But that wasn't what concerned him.

Luke's focus shifted to their injuries as he carefully scanned the group. Most were minor—scratches and bruises—nothing that wouldn't heal by tomorrow. Relief washed over him, and a weary sigh escaped his lips.

"The kids are improving," Inês continued, her voice lighter now. "They handled this all on their own without us stepping in directly." Her expression softened further, the tension easing from her shoulders as her eyes narrowed in thought.

"Maybe we'll even take first place," she said with a faint smirk. "Those birds have to boost our score by a lot."

Luke rolled his eyes, shooting her an unimpressed glance, which earned him a raised eyebrow in return.

"Fine, I guess it *will* boost us," he retorted, brushing the dust off his sword before sheathing it. Turning toward the barriers, he started walking, his voice dropping to a mutter as he added, "But those birds are a problem, especially with the barriers barely holding. If more show up…"

"If you're so worried, you should tell Mr. D and Chiron," Inês said as she caught up to him, twirling a strand of hair around her finger. "It's their job, after all. Well," she corrected herself, "mostly Chiron's, but still. Maybe give them a heads-up? A warning? Or even pitch some kind of plan in case the worst happens." She shrugged casually. "Just an idea."

Before Luke could reply, her tone brightened as she glanced ahead. "Oh, look! Our replacements are finally here. Took them long enough. I was this close to drag them here myself." She let out a dramatic sigh. "And I really need some beauty sleep after all this—or as much as I can get these days with these *boring* patrols."

Just as she said, Cabin Four and Seven had arrived. Luke could already make out Lee's golden hair in the distance—hard not to, really. The man's hair gleamed like spun gold under the sun, as if Apollo himself was making sure his son shone as brightly as possible.

*Probably thinks everyone's as desperate for attention as he is,* Luke thought uncharitably, recalling the meeting. Even Apollo's teeth had gleamed, as if a divine spotlight followed him everywhere—like he truly believed the world existed just to admire him.

Signaling for his brats to gather, Luke didn't stop moving until he'd crossed the barrier. The moment he stepped through, it felt as if a weight had lifted from his shoulders, allowing him to relax a little. The barrier felt like a safety net, a fragile sense of protection, but his brows furrowed in concern as his gaze drifted back to it. He could see it weakening, decaying bit by bit.

Before he could dwell on it further, Inês grabbed his arm and practically dragged him over to Lee. With her usual dramatic flair, she draped herself against him as if he were a support beam and declared, "My great and sunny friend Lee, how wonderful it is to see you've *finally* arrived! Luke and I have fought so valiantly that I'm about to drop dead right here."

"Sorry for arriving late, Inez," Lee said, his voice so earnest and his amber eyes so full of concern that it almost seemed like he genuinely felt bad for her supposed exhaustion. It was so sincere, it, apparently, made Inês second-guess her theatrics, as she coughed awkwardly and quickly adjusted her tone.

"Well, we handled it just fine," she said casually, brushing off the topic. "Those monsters didn't stand a chance." Turning to Luke, she gave him a pointed look. "Isn't that right, Luke?"

"Yeah," he replied with a sigh, shooting her an unimpressed look.

Lee smiled at him, but Luke didn't miss the sudden, conniving glint in Inês's eyes. Suspicious. Suspicious as hell.

"Well, I'm going," she announced, raising a hand to signal her cabin. Her eyes creased slightly with real fatigue as she added, "I need a bath—I'm filthy—and then I'm dropping dead. So, bye! See you at dinner. Or maybe tomorrow."

With that, she left quickly, leaving Luke and Lee alone.

The silence that followed felt… awkward. Luke noticed Lee shifting uncomfortably, which was odd. They'd known each other for over ten years—Lee shouldn't be acting like this around him.

*Well, obviously,* a voice in his head muttered, *the brat is—*

Luke cut the thought off abruptly, redirecting his focus. There were more important things to think about. Like going to the Big House.

“I need to go as well,” Luke declared after a brief silence, breaking the tension. Lee’s attention snapped to him, his expression, for some reason, flickering with disappointment.

But, well, Luke had things to do.

“Oh,” Lee said, his voice a little flat before he cleared his throat. “That’s fine… see you at dinner?”

“Yeah, see you later,” Luke replied quickly, already turning away and heading toward the Big House, his thoughts narrowing on the problem at hand.

If he was remembering correctly, those cursed birds appeared in the books too. They hadn’t caused serious injuries then, if he was recalling right, but… here? His brows furrowed darkly. Here, something like that could absolutely happen.

The sheer number of monsters showing up was troubling, and it didn’t line up with how things had played out in the books. Then again, that part hadn’t been detailed much—Percy had only arrived after the situation had already started to spiral. Maybe it *had* happened and wasn’t mentioned, or maybe this was unique to this reality.

Deep down, though, he felt it in his gut: it was the latter.

However, his thoughts were cut short when he realized he’d reached the Big House without even noticing. Glancing around, he was relieved to see both Chiron and Mr. D present, seated at their usual spot. They appeared to be playing pinochle—or perhaps just using the game as a facade while they discussed more pressing matters. Luke knew they’d been doing that a lot lately, especially after the meeting.

And, if he was being honest, he’d joined in on those talks quite a few times. Okay—*a lot* of times. And now, as he made his way toward them, he was already preparing to do it again.

“Uncle, Chiron,” Luke greeted as he dropped into one of the chairs. It looked like they were wrapping up a round of their game, though judging by the serious expressions on their faces, his earlier suspicion was right—they were using the game as a front for something more important.

Chiron offered him a smile, but it was stiff, the kind that didn’t quite reach his eyes. Luke could tell the centaur was forcing it, likely trying to maintain an air of cheerfulness to avoid making anyone suspect the situation was worse than it already seemed.

Mr. D, on the other hand, sighed heavily, snapping his fingers to clear the table. He laced his fingers together and rested his arms on the surface, fixing Luke with a flat, knowing stare.

“Well? Let’s hear it. I’m sure you’ve brought us yet another delightful problem to add to the ever-growing pile.” He clucked his tongue, his tone dark as he added, “Just what we needed—one more for the list.”

Luke pressed his lips together, drawing in a deep breath before letting out a huff. His expression twisted into a grimace as he said, “There was a decent-sized flock of Stymphalian

Birds outside. Some got away, and I'm worried they'll keep coming—more and more of them. And it's not just that. The monsters are getting bolder, testing the barriers more frequently."

He hesitated, then admitted, "I don't know how much longer the barriers can hold with so many monsters showing up. And these are just the weak ones. I don't even want to think about what'll happen if the stronger ones start coming too…"

Chiron closed his eyes, his face twisting as though in pain, while Mr. D's expression darkened. The god's gaze shifted to the horizon, toward the distant limits of Camp Half-Blood. After a moment, Chiron reopened his eyes and spoke, his tone grave.

"We'll assign archers to accompany all patrol groups, dividing Cabin Seven to spread across the others. Perhaps we'll break them into smaller groups for more frequent patrols. It seems the gaps in patrols are when the monsters start to gather. And with the barriers in their current state… better not to risk it."

He took a deep breath, turning his focus to Luke. "Next time you patrol, I'll join you. We'll use the opportunity to assess the situation and kill as many as we can together. But we also need a plan in place—an organized system—for… when I'm not here."

"That would be a relief, thank you, Chiron," Luke said, exhaling slowly. Still, he couldn't ignore the unspoken reference to the meeting, which stirred a fresh wave of worry through him.

It seemed the reminder didn't sit well with his uncle either.

Snorting, Mr. D summoned a Diet Coke, though the faint purple tint in his eyes betrayed his irritation. He waved a hand dismissively as he said, "Oh, you'll come back eventually, my centaur friend. Your substitute will be so inferior in every conceivable way that even the other gods will have to admit you're the better choice."

"Is that wise? In this situation?" Chiron countered, his tone solemn. "We're vulnerable, the children are in danger, and if someone incompetent comes in my place, it could make things even worse. It would be a disaster, Mr. D."

Noticing his uncle's eyes flash an even deeper shade of purple, Luke decided to speak up, voicing something that had been on his mind during their recent meetings.

"Well," Luke began, drawing their attention. Chiron's expression remained grave, while his uncle's face was unreadable, set like stone. "Maybe Uncle could choose someone who doesn't have much of a choice but to listen to him? Someone indebted to him, or maybe too scared to defy him, so they'd have to follow his orders. And if that person was also vulnerable to the other gods, maybe it would keep them satisfied too."

He paused, gauging their reactions, then added, "It would make things more certain for Mr. D. Easier to manage here."

Dionysus's eyes, still faintly glowing purple, began to fade back to blue as he visibly calmed. Narrowing his gaze, he tilted his head slightly, clearly considering the suggestion.

To Luke, it wasn't anything groundbreaking. Honestly, it felt like common sense. The idea would kill two birds with one stone, and he was confident his uncle would have reached the same conclusion eventually. Luke had simply been faster, speeding up the process instead of sitting through endless deliberations over people who were bad enough that the gods wouldn't want to keep them but not so bad that they'd endanger the demigods.

Humming thoughtfully, Mr. D tapped his fingers against the table. Then, without warning, he stood abruptly, a sharp, vicious glint flashing across his face.

Both Luke and Chiron startled, their attention snapping to him as he rose.

"How interesting," Mr. D mused, his tone almost lazy, though his eyes betrayed something far more dangerous. "Something just came to mind with that little idea of yours, Lucy."

Sauntering off, he paused briefly to glance back over his shoulder. "I'll be right back."

As he turned away, a dark, amused glint flickered in his eyes for just a moment—one Luke didn't miss. He also caught his uncle muttering under his breath, "There's someone I need to have a… *conversation* with."

And just like that, he was gone, disappearing in the blink of an eye, leaving Luke and Chiron staring at the spot where he'd stood just moments ago.

*Well,* Luke thought, exchanging a puzzled glance with Chiron, *I just hope Uncle came up with something that'll actually help.*

Chapter End Notes

So… patrolling. Athena's suggestion finally came into play, lol. Chiron hasn't left yet, and it's not been long since the council. Meanwhile, Mr. D is dragging his feet on making a decision, using his camp director privileges to take his time.

Inês is here, and she picked Silena as her successor, though she's unsure if she'll leave. Maybe she won't—things are complicated, and her home is across the sea in Portugal. Meanwhile, Luke's overwork finally gets addressed, lol. But, as usual, he doesn't trust any of his brats to handle the job, so he's making things harder for himself (again).

Lee shows up, still awkward, and Luke just nopes out of it, lol.

Oh, and the Stymphalian birds? Definitely not the last time we'll see them.

Thanks so much for reading! I always appreciate your comments, no matter how late you join the party.

So, what do you guys think—could the choice be Tantalus?

# Chapter 49: SoM - Bulls

Chapter Summary

> The bulls are here.
>
> Alas, I was planning on posting this later in the week, but then my university, being made of paper, couldn't handle the rain, and the wires blew or something. So, since classes have been canceled these days, I got time to answer the last comments and post it already, as I already had this written. Though next week's… I can't say when I'll post it—probably by the end of the week or the weekend, but no promises. Exams, man...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"The monsters are thinning out, which is good—don't get me wrong, I'd kill for a normal sleep schedule—but Cabin Five isn't in first place anymore," Clarisse grumbled, walking beside him as he and a group of her siblings made their way to the barriers.

Luke was joining her and a few Ares campers for patrol today, which was always... interesting. Last time, they'd gone completely berserk, tearing through the monsters so fast and so violently that he'd almost felt sorry for the things.

*Almost.*

Still, he couldn't deny Cabin Five's efficiency. They were like tiny, bloodthirsty war machines. It was almost scary, and Luke had to remind himself daily how lucky he was that these psychos were on *his* side—and at Camp Half-Blood, not Kronos'.

"You shouldn't feel too bad. It's just that the others are getting more chances to take down monsters without being swamped by the numbers, thanks to the new system—more frequent patrols, smaller groups," Luke said casually, flashing her a smile that earned an immediate eye roll.

"And you're *clearly* not saying that because you're in first place now and trying to make us feel better about being in second," she shot back, dry as ever, one brow arching in a look that radiated unimpressed energy.

"Of course not!" he protested immediately, though the amused lilt in his voice betrayed him. He couldn't entirely hide it—after all, he *had* been trying to tone down their obsession with this competition before it spiraled out of control. It was already a miracle it hadn't, though he figured that was only because things were still so serious.

Clarisse, of course, wasn't buying it for a second; her skeptical glare made that crystal clear.

"I would never do such a backhanded thing to you, little Clarisse," he said, layering on the mock sincerity as he spread his hands in feigned innocence. "What would your dear, wise monk of a brother think of me?"

Huffing, she made a face at being called ‘little.’ And okay, fine—she *wasn’t* little anymore—but he’d known her since she was just a brat going around kicking shins, so technically, he had a point. Still, *rude*.

Deciding to let it slide, she mulled over her response for a moment before saying, “He’d probably spout something about you ‘sticking to your own fighting style.’ Which is ridiculous, by the way, since this is a conversation, not a duel. But it’d go something like, ‘There are many ways to win a fight, Clarisse. Do not begrudge others their style, Clarisse. Learn from them, Clarisse.’”

She mimicked her brother’s overly solemn tone with just enough exaggeration to drive the point home, rolling her eyes as she finished.

Swallowing back a laugh, Luke tilted his head, sending her a sidelong glance as a smile tugged at his lips. He nodded. “Yeah, that definitely sounds like him. Peter’s always had this thing—like the older he gets, the more he thinks he’s some sort of wise sage or something. All formal and philosophical. Though, to be fair, he was like that when we were kids too.”

He caught the curious look she sent his way. Peter wasn't exactly the type to talk about his childhood—it probably hadn't even occurred to him to bring it up, that fight-obsessed boar. Lowering his voice as if sharing a secret, Luke leaned in a little closer. Almost without thinking, Clarisse leaned in too, driven by her curiosity.

“But honestly?” he whispered, his eyes glinting with amusement. “I think your brother just read way too many xianxia stories. He was pulling that whole wise master act even when he was twelve.”

Clarisse snorted, shaking her head as she leaned back into her space. Her expression softened, just a little, a flicker of amusement breaking through. “My brother says a lot of nonsensical things, and we all just go along with it because he’s strong. But honestly? It’s weird sometimes. Still, I guess it works for him—he was the undisputed cabin leader for years, and no one ever came close to taking him down when he was still here…”

Her voice trailed off, and the softness vanished as her expression shut down. Her eyes hardened into a glare, fixed on nothing in particular, while a deep scowl settled on her face.

Luke glanced at her out of the corner of his eye, watching her for a moment before shifting his gaze to the two Ares kids trailing behind them. Their expressions had shut down too, and they were eyeing Clarisse with a mix of caution and wariness. It made him want to take a deep breath and let out an even heavier sigh.

Clarisse wasn’t fine. She was moodier, which for her meant more lashing out and doubling down on violence. Luke was pretty sure it wasn’t just her usual temper—there was something heavier beneath it, something that felt like sadness. He knew part of it was because she missed her brother. Peter had stayed home this time, off to college or something, unable to

visit, to guide her through being head counselor, or to teach her anything new. But Luke understood that wasn't really what she wanted. She just wanted his company—to spend time with her big brother, the one she admired.

He envied her for that. She still had someone, even if he wasn't here right now.

Sometimes, Luke found himself sitting by that big, flat rock where Aubrey had been cremated, staring at it in silence. He'd try to imagine what she would've done in his place, what more she could've taught him if she were still here. What advice she might've given, what lessons he might've learned—anything that could've helped him now.

And then there was Chris'... betrayal. Clarisse had taken it hard, denying it repeatedly, swearing it couldn't be true. But when the truth finally sank in, the denial gave way to suffocating silence—brief, but heavy—before it exploded into fury. She started picking fights with anyone who so much as looked at her wrong. And then Annabeth left for home. That hadn't helped either of them. It made Clarisse worse, and Luke, if he was honest, too.

He didn't blame Annie for going, but it left him lonelier and constantly worrying about her.

The outside world was dangerous, more than ever now.

In any case, Clarisse wasn't okay, and Luke could see it—more clearly than anyone else, really. He could feel it too, because he wasn't okay either.

But he was the adult here.

"Well, he might not be here right now, but he's trusting you to do what's best for Cabin Five in his place. If Peter—with all his strange standards—is trusting you with this, it means you're doing something right," Luke said, keeping his gaze ahead and his tone calm, matter-of-fact.

Over the years, he'd learned that with Clarisse, a neutral approach worked best—less *I'm trying to help you* and more *I'm just pointing out the obvious.* It kept her from bristling and throwing her walls up quite so quickly.

She harrumphed, but Luke caught the slight drop in her shoulders—a more than clear sign to him that she'd relaxed, even if she'd never admit it. Behind him, the other Ares kids let out barely stifled sighs of relief. Luke didn't need to turn around to know; he could hear it just fine. Luckily, it seemed Clarisse either didn't notice or, by some rare miracle, chose to ignore it this time.

Judging by the furrow in her brows and the distant look on her face, it was probably the former.

"I do my job well enough," she said at last, though her voice wavered with a flicker of hesitation, her expression momentarily conflicted. "But last year—" She cut herself off abruptly with a sharp click of her tongue, a scowl forming as her grip tightened on her spear—the new one her father had recently given her.

It was almost identical to her old one, an electric spear that crackled faintly with power, but this one looked sturdier, tougher, like it could take more punishment. It was also far more effective in water—or any liquid, really. Getting hit by it felt like it was frying your blood from the inside out. Luke would know; he was still rubbing his shoulder from where she'd struck him during the last Capture the Flag. That extra kick? Yeah, definitely had something to do with Percy.

She called it Maimer, though some of the other campers had started calling it Lamer behind her back—something Luke thought was unnecessarily mean. Clarisse treasured anything her father gave her, guarding those gifts like a dragon with its hoard. They were some of the few possessions she truly cared about, one of the rare things she let herself show affection for.

Not that she let people catch on to that too often—and if they did, well, she handled it the same way she was handling it now.

"That wasn't your fault," Luke began instinctively, but then stopped, reconsidering. Because, well, yeah—Clarisse was partially to blame. He still remembered the punch to his face and those hellish days spent trying to keep Camp from spiraling into chaos, all because she couldn't resist needling Cabin Six. He corrected himself with a more measured tone. "Well, not entirely, anyway. Malcolm's just as much to blame as you are. Both of you got more wrapped up in your pissing contest than in what was best for Camp at that moment."

She deflated slightly, her lips pressing into a thin line as she glanced away. Luke knew Peter had already given her a thorough talking-to about this, but it still felt important to remind her. With Peter away, Luke was the closest thing to a responsible adult she had, and if he could help guide her into being a better head counselor—or even just get her to rein in that fatal flaw of hers—then he'd do it.

He straightened, his tone firm as he met her gaze, locking eyes. "It was a harsh life lesson, but luckily, it wasn't something that couldn't be fixed. Now you've learned from it, and you can move forward as a better head counselor."

With a quick glance at him out of the corner of her eye, followed by a sharp glare at her siblings, Clarisse made her point unmistakably clear. They froze, then quickly scrambled back a few steps when she gave a curt nod of her head.

Finally, she let out a huff, the sound more tired than frustrated, and rested her spear against her shoulder. She tilted her head back, eyes closing briefly as if trying to steady herself. When she opened them again, her rust-colored gaze locked on Luke. She stopped abruptly, forcing him to halt as well. For a moment, she looked different—vulnerable, more open, no longer hiding behind the mask of anger she wore around everyone else, even her own siblings.

"I—" She let out a deep sigh, her brows tightening in frustration when the words wouldn't come easily. But she pushed through, slamming the butt of her spear against the ground with a sharp crack. "I know I was at fault. I'm not so stupid or dishonorable that I'd shirk responsibility for my own actions. I know I failed, that I made everything worse. And I've made up for it—or, at least, I'm still making up for it."

She hesitated, then muttered, her voice growing sharper, angrier, as she continued. “It’s just —I’m head counselor, like you, like Annabeth, but it feels like you, Annabeth, and Peter are miles ahead. Annabeth went on a quest—the first one in years, with a child of the Big Three, no less—and came back a hero. Then she went home, to that family of hers, all because *he* asked her to, even with everything she’s dealing with. And me? I was stuck here, got my spear broken by a *newbie*, and couldn’t even honor my father properly. In the end, I just made things worse for him. Especially with the whole mess he had to deal with after Chris—!”

She cut herself off abruptly, her grip tightening on her spear as her voice cracked.

Closing his eyes, Luke steadied himself, his heart heavy at the mention of his brother. The weight pressed down hard, but he wrestled it back under control. When he opened his eyes, his voice was calm, steady. “You made a mistake, but it was handled. It became a lesson, and you’ll grow from it. You won’t make the same mistakes again. That’s what matters. And you’re young, Clarisse. Quests are back now, and you’ll have your chance to prove yourself to your father.”

He tilted his head slightly, gesturing toward the spear, his tone shifting to something more measured. “Look at that spear, Clarisse. Your father already values you. He gave you that—a better one than the last. A magical item most demigods won’t ever get, not even in a lifetime, and you’ve gotten a second one in just a year. And he still gave it to *you*, even after everything.”

Luke took a deep breath, his gaze drifting to some far-off point as his voice softened. “You talk about how you failed him, about the mistakes you’ve made, and how far ahead you think I am. But Clarisse, I’m older than you. I’ve been head counselor for longer, and I’ve made plenty of mistakes too,” he admitted, his words carrying a heavier weight now. “Really bad ones.”

He shook his head and pressed on. “And Annie? She’s made her share of mistakes as head counselor too. Nobody’s perfect.”

His voice softened further as he added, “And Annabeth going home... that’s been coming for a long time. You’ve seen her father’s ring on her necklace, right? She needed this—to see things for herself, to finally face it after all these years. Maybe reconnect, if she’s lucky. But more than anything, I think she needed closure. To finally put things to rest in her own way.”

Clarisse stared at him, her expression flickering with conflict, emotions too quick and too tangled to read. The moment dragged on longer than it probably was before she snapped her head toward her siblings and gestured sharply for them to catch up. Then, without a word, she turned and marched off, her pace faster, her steps harder. Luke had to quicken his stride to keep up, and the gasps from behind told him her siblings were struggling even more.

Out of the corner of his eye, he studied her, catching the faint traces of turmoil beneath her stony mask. Internally, he sighed.

She was always like that—a step forward, three steps back. The only person who could hold a conversation with her that even hinted at vulnerability was Peter. But Peter wasn’t here. It

was just Luke. And while she listened to him more than most and even seemed to care about him in her own way, he wasn't her brother.

That, Luke had learned early on, made all the difference.

Averting his gaze to the path ahead, Luke knew his words hadn't done much. Maybe they'd make her think, maybe even stop her from spiraling too deeply into those thoughts—but he doubted it. Clarisse was too stubborn for that. Still, he hoped. A faint, distant hope.

He took a deep breath as Thalia's tree came into view, its leaves falling faster than they should. A knot of worry tightened in his chest as his eyes followed the leaves drifting to the ground. Would *that* quest happen this time? And if it did, would Clarisse's need to prove herself make a difference—for better or worse? He didn't know. He couldn't say.

But he wasn't expecting much.

Instantly, he shook the thought off, forcing himself to push away the helplessness creeping in—the kind that had become so familiar, so deeply ingrained over the years. He couldn't let it take root again. Luke had already made the mistake of hesitating, of not acting decisively enough when it mattered. He couldn't afford to make that mistake again.

He *had* to be more assertive.

Just then, a sharp, almost mechanical sound reached his ears, making Luke tense immediately and reach for his sword. Around him, the Ares kids reacted just as quickly, instinctively forming a loose defensive circle, their weapons raised and ready.

Clarisse, however, didn't hesitate.

With her spear gripped tightly in hand, she marched forward, her steps steady, her back straight. Luke moved to accompany her, matching her pace and stepping in beside her. When she came to an abrupt stop, she slammed the butt of her spear against the ground, her narrowed eyes scanning ahead, searching for the source of the sound.

Soon, they appeared.

Massive bulls—strange, unnatural ones. Their skin gleamed bronze under the sunlight, and then Luke realized it wasn't skin at all—it was plating, like armor. Metallic bulls. Heat radiated off them, distorting the air around them, as if a furnace burned within. Even from a distance, he could see the molten glow of red metal beneath their bellies and necks, as though they'd been forged in the heart of a volcano. Thick, dark smoke poured steadily from their nostrils, while their massive silver horns, streaked with veins of bronze, caught the light with a sharp gleam.

The sight made something click in Luke's mind, a memory resurfacing.

Not ordinary bronze.

He recognized it immediately.

*Celestial Bronze.*

These were the Colchis Bulls. The Khalkotauroi. Here, in Camp. The legendary bulls gifted to Aeëtes, the king of Colchis, by the divine blacksmith Hephaestus—the same bulls Jason had faced as one of his challenges to claim the Golden Fleece.

*Why were they here?* Luke's brows furrowed, his grip tightening on the handle of his sword as he prepared for a fight. He knew they appeared in the books, but even so… why? Why here? Was this Kronos' doing? The king of Colchis had been dead for centuries, so maybe the bulls had gone rogue, untamed without a master. Maybe Hephaestus hadn't wanted them back and simply let them roam free.

It didn't matter. Whatever the reason, they were here now, and Camp was in danger.

"Be careful, they're moving furnaces, and they breathe fire," Luke called over his shoulder as he crossed the barriers, sprinting toward the bulls. Behind him, Clarisse barked orders to her siblings, the clatter of their weapons and the pounding of their feet echoing in his ears.

The bulls charged wildly, their massive bodies barreling straight for the defenses. It was hard not to feel a hint of intimidation—they were enormous, far larger than any ordinary bull.

But Luke had faced Ladon before, and compared to that monstrous aberration, these automaton were nothing. Not even close.

And this time, Luke wouldn't freeze. Not again.

Narrowing his eyes, he focused on how the bulls moved, studying their patterns, their rhythm. They weren't real animals, just imitations. He knew that much—the Hephaestus kids had told him as much during the forging sessions he occasionally joined when he had the time. But these weren't automaton made by demigods; they were forged by a god. That made them different.

Still, Charles' voice echoed in his mind, the kid Silena had started orbiting around—Charles, who would live this time. Luke had vowed it. No more losses.

*Every machine has a flaw,* Charles had said, his voice clear in Luke's memory. *A little something that's not perfect. Especially the ones that try to imitate life. Biological things aren't perfect, so how could the things that mimic them be?*

Luke clenched his jaw. He was willing to wager on that.

One of the bulls snorted, a thick plume of smoke pouring from its nostrils as the grating sound of metal scraping against metal filled the air. The noise was sharp and unbearable, making Luke's ears ache, but he pushed through, keeping his focus. In his periphery, he saw the Ares kids rushing forward, splitting off in different directions, shouting and taunting the bulls.

*Smart.* They were trying to separate the bulls or confuse them. If these automaton were modeled after real bulls, that kind of provocation might be enough to send them into a single-

minded rage—a behavioral weakness they could exploit.

But it wasn't enough. Rage alone wouldn't bring these things down. There had to be something more—a real weakness.

Luke just had to figure it out.

Just as expected, the bulls started running in wild, erratic patterns, as if trying to decide who to target but getting more and more agitated. There was too much stimulation—too many campers making noise, darting around, presenting themselves as threats. They charged one way, then abruptly turned and bolted toward someone else, only to change direction again.

It was chaos. They ended up running in circles, not attacking anyone directly, but scorching the ground beneath them and leaving heavy dents from their sheer weight and heat.

Trying to steady himself, Luke halted, narrowing his eyes and locking his focus on the bulls, searching for something—*anything*—he could exploit.

Then he saw it.

One of the bulls moved close enough to make his muscles tense, ready to spring into action, but it pivoted away at the last second. As it turned, he caught sight of it—a narrow slit in the bronze plating on its hind legs. The joints were exposed, likely left uncovered to allow the bulls better movement, just like real, flesh-and-blood ones.

It was a vulnerability, something Luke could exploit. Something he was actually very good at.

But it would be risky. *Very* risky.

Steeling himself, Luke leaned forward, locking his eyes on the closest bull. He took a deep breath, filling his lungs, and then screamed—loud, louder than the chaos of the battlefield, louder than the other campers adding to the pandemonium.

"Here, you pile of scrap! Come and get me!"

The shout cut through the chaos, and both bulls turned, their machine eyes locking onto him.

Clarisse, however, quickly shook off the brief pause his voice had caused and immediately caught onto his plan. Without wasting a moment, she began barking orders to her siblings, directing them to corner the other bull—the one farther away—distracting it and leaving Luke to handle his target.

The automaton faced him fully now, smoke rising in thick plumes from its nostrils. Its bronze hooves dug into the ground, scorching the grass beneath it, as it lowered its head just enough to level its massive horns at him.

For a moment, everything stilled. Then, with no warning, the bull charged.

It rushed at him like an unstoppable force—a massive, fast, ton-heavy arrow. One that could trample him flat or gut him clean if he made even the smallest mistake.

But he had to try.

Rushing forward, Luke charged straight toward the bull, his eyes narrowed, feeling an odd calm settle over him the closer he got to the hulking automaton. As the bull lowered its head further, aiming to impale him with those massive Celestial Bronze horns, Luke waited until the last moment, then sidestepped sharply.

The rush of air from the beast's momentum hit him like a wave, the pressure almost enough to knock him off balance. He felt the searing heat radiating from the metal, so close it nearly burned his skin, and for a brief second, the gleam of bronze passed inches from his nose. But he ignored the boiling heat and didn't hesitate.

With a sharp arc, Luke swung his sword, slicing cleanly into the unprotected joint of the beast's hindlegs. The bull's own momentum drove the blade deeper, the impact ringing out like metal on bone. The cut wasn't deep enough to sever the leg completely, but it was enough.

The bull stumbled, unable to stop itself, and its weight carried it forward, crashing into the ground with a deafening clatter of metal. It struggled to rise, its damaged leg giving out as it flailed, its movements jerky and erratic.

Luke didn't waste a second. He moved quickly, circling around to the bull's back and staying well out of range of its horns—one hit from those, and he'd be meeting God far sooner than he intended. Celestial Bronze was deadly against monsters, but it wasn't any kinder to demigods. Being half supernatural, with one foot in the unreal, meant that otherworldly metals like this could harm him just as easily as any mortal blade.

And worse, this bull didn't just have Celestial Bronze—it had steel too. Double deadly.

The *joys* of being a demigod.

Spotting another gap in its armor, this time near the neck, Luke drove his sword deep into the exposed joint. The heat radiating from the automaton was overwhelming, scorching his skin and making him flush and sweat. He gritted his teeth, forcing himself to hold steady as the blade pierced through.

The bull froze for a moment, letting out a low, grating metallic groan as the brightness of its bronze plating began to fade. Its internal workings whined and sputtered, growing weaker and weaker until it finally went still. The molten glow in its joints dimmed completely, leaving behind a lifeless bronze shell.

Breathing in gasps, Luke hissed through his teeth at the discomfort as he backtracked, putting space between himself and the bull's carcass, still hot enough to make the air around it shimmer. His sword slipped from his hand, clattering to the ground—it was too hot to hold, the heat from the automaton having seeped into the blade.

Glancing down at himself, Luke quickly assessed the damage.

His skin was flushed, the pale tone of his flesh now an angry red, slick with sweat. Painful blisters had already formed on his hands, the areas that had been closest to the bull. A faint dizziness crept in, subtle but noticeable. It wasn't overwhelming—not yet. He hadn't stayed near the monster long enough for the heat to completely sap his strength.

But he could still fight.

Snapping his head toward the Ares kids, he watched them for a moment, gauging how they were faring and how he could possibly help. His brow furrowed as he clicked his tongue in frustration. In his state, he couldn't pull the same stunt twice—it was too risky, and there wasn't anyone else agile or nimble enough to replicate what he'd just done.

That meant they needed to figure out something else.

*Fast.*

Mind racing, Luke crouched to grab his sword. It had cooled enough to handle, though it still made his hands itch, the pain sharp as he gripped it. He had to push through—it was fight or fall.

His gaze flicked to Clarisse, who was harassing the bull with precise, strategic stabs at its weak points. So, she'd noticed them too. *Good*. Her strikes kept the automaton focused on her, giving her siblings opportunities to flank and attack from behind.

When the bull turned, snapping its horns toward them or lashing out with its hind legs, the demigods scattered like clockwork, their movements coordinated. They regrouped quickly, making noise to disorient the bull before closing in again.

They worked like a well-oiled machine. Their spears gave them the advantage of reach, letting them stay farther from the worst of the heat.

But Luke's eyes narrowed as he caught onto something troubling.

While the strategy was keeping the bull occupied, it wasn't wearing it down fast enough. Worse, it wasn't pushing it back. In the time he'd been fighting, the automaton had managed to cross the barriers—a dangerous sign. More than dangerous.

A monster this strong breaching the barriers was the last thing Camp needed.

It was unwanted proof that the barriers were weakening by the day, that they had reached a point where they were no longer reliable, leaving the children exposed.

*Unacceptable.*

And now, the bull was only growing more agitated. Smoke poured from its nostrils in faster, thicker plumes, and its bronze plates glowed brighter with each passing moment. The air around it shimmered, rippling like a furnace.

It was getting hotter.

And that was very, *very* bad.

“Keep the line!” Clarisse shouted, her voice cutting through the chaos like a whip.

But before her order could be followed, the bull unleashed a stream of fire from its mouth. The flames struck one of the Ares boys, and his scream tore through the battlefield. The plume of his helmet ignited, and in desperation, he tore it off, revealing the raw, red burns across one side of his face. He staggered out of formation, breaking the carefully coordinated group around the bull.

The ripple effect was immediate. Confusion spread through the other campers like wildfire. The bull took full advantage, swinging its horns and burning more demigods as it shattered spears with each movement.

Tensing, Luke cursed under his breath. He readied himself to dive into the fray, even without a plan. Determination flared in his chest as he stepped forward, knowing it would have to be enough—until a noise stopped him.

It came from outside the barriers.

Close. Too close.

He startled, nerves fraying, snapping his head to the side as he searched for the source.

“Behind you!” a voice shouted—a very familiar voice. The sound of quick footsteps approaching made Luke frown. “Careful!”

Then the sound of metal colliding with metal reached his ears, instantly making him shift his attention now that he knew that the other noise wasn’t a threat.

And what he saw made him curse yet again.

“Puta que pariu*,” Luke cursed under his breath, his heart sinking as he spotted Clarisse on the ground, flames licking dangerously close around her.

The bull barreled past—thankfully not trampling her, as those massive hooves would have been deadly. Instead, it charged toward the other campers, spewing fire that melted their shields and drew screams of pain. Some were burned badly, their arms blistering and raw—Cabin Seven would have no shortage of work today.

But the worst came next.

The bull circled back, its movements deliberate, its glowing red eyes locking onto Clarisse as she struggled to get up. Her skin was already burned in places, her scowl fierce, but Luke caught the look in her eyes.

*Fear.*

His heart hammered inside his chest, and before he could think, he was rushing forward—he couldn't lose anyone else. Not again.

The world seemed to slow as he closed the distance, and, by some grace of God, he managed to grab the back of Clarisse's armor by its corded straps, yanking her to the side at the very last second.

The bull barreled past them, its searing heat washing over him, intensifying the prickling burn already gnawing at his skin. He hissed as the pain sharpened, his existing burns worsening under the wave of heat.

Luke barely had time to steady himself before his hand moved instinctively to his sword, ready to strike at its hindlegs like he had with the first one—only to realize it wasn't there.

But he didn't have too worry too much about his lack of a weapon.

Ignoring Clarisse's muttered curses as she tried to pry his grip off her straps—without much success—Luke paid her no mind. His thoughts were locked on one thing: she had to be safe. She was his responsibility, his kid, and that was all that mattered.

Movement at the edge of his vision caught his attention, and he turned to see three figures approaching.

Annabeth, already barking orders at the Ares kids. For once, they didn't begrudge taking commands from a child of Athena and quickly fell into line. Their ranks reorganized quickly, more focused and disciplined, confusing the bull and restoring some of the control they'd had at the start.

Then Percy, uncapping his sword as he arrived. His gaze darted between Luke and the bull before settling on the automaton. Without hesitation, he rushed toward it.

And finally, someone Luke didn't recognize. A towering kid followed close behind Percy. Luke squinted as the figure came closer, trying to make sense of what he was seeing. The boy's massive frame and singular eye—wide and almost innocent in its youthfulness—stopped Luke in his tracks.

Instinctively, his battle-focused mind registered the cyclops as a threat. His grip tightened on Clarisse's straps as he pulled her behind him, positioning himself between her and the creature. But as the cyclops moved closer, stopping just beyond the barrier, Luke hesitated.

He studied him again, something nagging at the back of his mind, a faint prick of recognition tugging at his awareness.

It clicked.

*Tyson*. This had to be Tyson.

Then, he heard Annabeth scream, "Tyson, help him!"

Luke's head snapped back, his eyes darting to where the bull had broken away from the other campers and was now charging straight for Percy. The boy, stubborn and reckless as always, was struggling to stand. Luke noticed the wobble in his legs—an injured ankle or maybe worse—but even then, Percy held his sword out in front of him, his brows furrowed in either pain or concentration. Luke couldn't tell.

This was bad.

Agitated, Luke's gaze searched for his sword, but it was too far away, well out of reach. As he scanned the battlefield, he caught movement near the barriers. The boy-cyclops—Tyson—was rushing forward, trying to cross the threshold, but his momentum slowed the moment he reached the edge. His movements ground to a halt, and the barrier forced him back.

The barriers were weak—far weaker than they should have been—but for a cyclops like Tyson, inexperienced and young, they might as well have been walls of steel.

"I… can't… cross!" Tyson lamented, his voice heavy with frustration as he tried again and again, only to be pushed back each time.

"I, Annabeth Chase, give you permission to enter Camp Half-Blood!" Annie's voice rang out from somewhere behind Luke, cutting through the chaos before he could react.

Before Luke had time to process what was happening, Tyson surged forward, crossing the barrier and throwing himself between the bull and Percy.

Percy's panicked shouts for Tyson to get back rang out, sharp and desperate, but the cyclops didn't flinch. He ignored the cries entirely, focused on the bull.

There was nothing to worry about, Luke knew, even as a torrent of flames erupted from the bull, engulfing Tyson completely. The sight made Luke's own burns throb, his skin prickling uncomfortably as if he was the one in the fire, being cooked alive.

But Tyson wasn't like him. Cyclopes weren't demigods.

Fire couldn't hurt them.

When the torrent of flames finally ceased, Tyson stood unharmed. Before the bull could unleash another one, the cyclops lunged forward and punched it square in the face.

"Bad cow!"

What followed could only be described as a pummeling—brutal and merciless. Tyson's fists slammed into the bull's head over and over, with no hint of holding back. Craters began forming in its metal face, fire and smoke escaping from the holes. With each punch, more of its inner workings were exposed—its metal skeleton, circuits, and parts that Luke couldn't even begin to understand.

Finally, with one last bone-crushing punch, Tyson sent the bull crashing to the ground. Its battered body lay motionless, fires still flickering through cracks in its mangled frame. Just

like the other one—but far more destroyed—its bronze plating had dulled, and smoke poured from the wreckage.

It didn't crumble to dust, being an automaton rather than a real monster.

*Maybe the Hephaestus kids can salvage something out of this,* a part of Luke's mind muttered absently as he stared at the wreckage.

The thought was cut off as he felt Clarisse yank herself free from his grip.

"You!" she yelled, marching straight toward Percy, who was now on his feet, a canteen of something in his hands—nectar, Luke realized after a moment.

"Don't go screaming like that again in the middle of a battlefield, you moron!" Clarisse snapped. "You distracted me!"

Percy made a face, already straightening up and furrowing his brows, clearly about to retort with something sharp-tongued. But before he could get the chance, Annabeth stepped in, her tone crisp.

"He made a mistake," she said, shooting a pointed look at Percy, who immediately snapped his mouth shut, though his expression turned sour.

Annabeth turned to Clarisse. "But right now, you've got injured campers who need your attention, Clarisse. Go deal with that. We can argue about this later."

Clarisse huffed but didn't argue, immediately turning to check on her siblings.

For all her temper, she was a damn good head counselor. Luke felt a flicker of pride swell in his chest at the sight, a quiet reaffirmation that she wasn't anything like the doubts she'd thrown at herself earlier.

For a moment, he felt the urge to follow, to check on the injured campers himself, but he pushed it aside.

There was something here that needed his attention.

Something *very* pressing.

"Now," Luke said casually, turning to Annabeth and Percy before either could speak, though his gaze stayed fixed on the… other boy. "Explain to me why you brought a cyclops here."

"He helped us," Annabeth cut in immediately, defensive as ever.

So like her—jumping to conclusions.

Luke didn't argue. He wasn't going to hurt the kid. The kid was still just a kid, even if he was a monster. He already knew why they'd brought Tyson here—or at least he thought he did. But it was always better to confirm things.

It also gave him a reason to explain how he knew so much about the cyclops. And, more importantly, he needed to come up with something solid to convince Mr. D, especially with how stressed the god had been lately with Chiron leaving soon.

Though it seemed Percy was still hung up on what Luke had just said.

“A cyclops? What?” Percy blurted, whipping around to face Tyson.

He stared at the kid intently, wide-eyed, and Luke could tell the exact moment he finally saw through the Mist. Percy’s gaze locked onto the single, big, wet, brown eye sitting right in the middle of Tyson’s forehead.

“Yes, a cyclops,” Annabeth said, her tone clipped. “Probably a baby—maybe one of the homeless orphans.”

“What?” Percy said again, his voice rising, his wide eyes fixed on Tyson, who stood silently beside him, tears streaming steadily down his cheeks.

“They’re children of nature spirits and gods,” Luke interjected smoothly, ignoring the sharp look Annabeth shot his way.

He wasn’t about to tell Percy right now that the cyclops standing next to him was his half-brother—not when the kid already looked like he was barely processing what he’d just learned.

“Most of them end up abandoned,” Luke continued, his gaze flicking briefly to Tyson, who flinched a little under the attention. “Left to survive on the streets. It’s cruel, but it happens. More often than it should.”

“I don’t know where you found this one, or where he found you, for that matter, but he seems attached to you,” Annabeth cut in.

She sent Tyson a cold, assessing look—the same sharpness Luke had once seen in Athena’s eyes.

She scratched her arm absentmindedly, near the shoulder.

He didn’t know much about what had happened during those years she’d spent on the streets before coming to Camp—she never liked to talk about it—but he knew she shared the same canon fear of cyclopes.

If anything, hers seemed even more pronounced.

“We should bring him to Chiron,” she continued, her voice firm. “Let him decide what to do.”

Luke clapped his hands, the sound sharp enough to cut through the tension as he took control of the conversation.

“Well, children, first you need to be told a few things.”

Tiredness washed over him, his shoulders sagging as his expression settled into a deep frown. His gaze shifted toward Thalia's tree, and instinctively, Annabeth and Percy followed his line of sight.

The moment their eyes landed on it, they froze.

He understood their reaction well. Even though he saw it every day, he still wasn't used to it. The tree looked sick—its once-strong branches now almost bare, with a massive pile of rotting leaves scattered at its base. The bark was cracked, oozing green sap from a wound that refused to heal—a wound that had been bleeding for days.

"We've been attacked," he said evenly, "and Chiron has been blamed for the fallout."

Chapter End Notes

*Puta que pariu - goddamn it, holy shit, you know, those kinds of things. Though the literal translation is strange in English, lol.

So, Clarisse… she's a ball of complex emotions, with so many things going on inside her little head. And Luke is trying to help her, but alas, Clarisse only listens to one adult, and that's Peter. And Peter is busy being a menace at his college or something—maybe even being the monsters' bogeyman.

Luke being cool again—this arc is all about action and showing just how strong, cool, and hot Luke is, lol. Let's all admire him. But, of course, he got hurt, because he's not indestructible, and those bulls? Yeah, they're strong.

And Annie and Percy are back! Tyson is finally here too! Poor kid—Luke thought he was a threat at first. And, well, the other demigods… let's just say they won't feel very happy with him around. The constant wave of monsters on their doorstep every day won't mellow them out either…

In any case, thank you all for reading! All comments are appreciated, and it doesn't matter if you're late to the party!

So, what do you guys think—will the barriers hold or not?

# Chapter 50: SoM - Substitution

Chapter Summary

A conversation about the bulls with Mr. D and what to do about them. Luke proposes something he never thought he would wish for after so long, but Mr. D shuts it down. And the substitute is here too.

I'm switching to posting every two weeks until the semester ends—might keep it that way after since, well, I've got an itch for my other projects too… but we'll see how it goes.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"And what was it you said happened again, Lucy? Something about a rodeo inside the barriers?" Mr. D drawled, lounging in his armchair with his legs crossed and an air of complete nonchalance.

To anyone else, that would've been all there was to it.

But Luke knew better.

The worry was buried deep, hidden under layers of practiced nonchalance. It showed in the smallest ways—the slight tension in his shoulders, the faint furrow of his brows, and, most of all, the sharp focus in his eyes. Little things, but enough for Luke to notice. He'd learned to spot the tells over the years, signs that his uncle was far more affected than he let on.

Luke took a deep breath and repeated, for the third time, what had happened that afternoon.

"The Copper-Smith's bulls—the ones he gave to King Aeëtes of Colchis—two of them showed up outside the barriers during my patrol with Clarisse and a group of campers, mostly from Cabin Five. They kept advancing, no stopping, no hesitation, so we engaged. I managed to take one of them down," he said, rubbing his now-healed hands.

The burns had been brutal, but his uncle hadn't given him a choice—ambrosia, right away, as soon as he reached the Big House.

He'd headed there as fast as he could after giving Annabeth and Percy a quick summary of what had happened while they'd been away. The report was too important to risk detouring to Cabin Seven's healers and dealing with Lee hovering and fussing over rest. That would've taken forever to shake him off, and this was critical.

“The others focused on hit-and-run tactics to keep the second bull distracted, trying to wear it down. It was working—for a while. Then…” Luke trailed off, pressing his lips into a thin line as the image of the boy’s burned face flashed in his mind.

The fire had hit point-blank, and even with healing, it was bad. *Too bad.* He doubted the kid would come out of it unscarred.

“Then one of the kids got hit by a blast of fire, and the formation fell apart,” he said quietly, rubbing his arm absently. “But Percy and Annabeth came back with that newcomer, and they helped. We managed to finish it off.”

His uncle only hummed in response, tapping his fingers restlessly against his Diet Coke can before taking a sip. His gaze drifted past the windows, a frown slowly deepening on his face.

Luke watched him for a moment, then followed his gaze to the faint shimmer of the rotting barriers outside. The sight made a question flicker in his mind once again, but he hesitated. The weight of the day pressed harder on him, exhaustion settling deep into his bones.

Finally, he let out a quiet sigh and asked, “Why were they even here, Uncle? I thought they were off in some faraway land after King Aeëtes died—or maybe taken back by the Divine Blacksmith or something. They’re not supposed to be anywhere near New York, right?”

If nothing else, those lessons on Ancient Greek mythology—or ‘historical lessons about the gods and demigods,’ as his uncle liked to say, very pointedly, whenever Luke dared utter the forbidden word *myth* —were proving useful for once.

Dionysus shifted his gaze back to him slowly, his lips pursed as he studied Luke.

For a moment, he seemed older—no, he *was* older. Luke caught the faintest shimmer of something beneath the surface, something coiled tight and alive, dangerous and *euphoric* .

And then, just as suddenly, it was gone, snapping back into place, and his uncle’s tired, all-too-human form reappeared.

Luke blinked, but before he could fully process what he’d seen, Mr. D finally spoke.

“They weren’t supposed to be here,” Dionysus said, his voice sharp. “Those bulls were meant to stay in the Old Lands, far away from here. But it’s difficult to keep track of things like that —nobody bothers anymore. Hephaestus doesn’t want his old trinkets. Says they’re just outdated prototypes, full of flaws, or whatever else that bore of a god rambles on about. Probably doesn’t want the reminder of some long-dead king he pawned them off on. And the others?” He huffed, shaking his head. “They don’t care. It’s got nothing to do with us.”

His expression darkened as he pressed his lips together. “But those things are still dangerous, no matter what Hephaestus says. Maybe someone saw the breach and took the opportunity.” His gaze fixed on Luke. “The Crooked One. You know this as well as I do—he’s active now. This weakening of the barriers? That was him. And those bulls showing up here?” He paused, scowling. “Far too convenient. They’re not even meant to be on this side of the ocean. Someone had to bring them here—and that someone can only be that old tyrant.”

Immediately, Luke tensed, his gaze shifting away as his fingers fidgeted.

Even now —*even though everyone knew*— the mention of Kronos made Luke uneasy. Not the kids, though. The kids were still in the dark, unaware of who exactly their enemy was. But the ones who mattered, the ones in charge? *The gods?* They knew. And yet, it still felt like Luke carried some secret he couldn't let slip.

Because he did.

Even after so long without the dreams, the memory of Kronos reaching for him, using his brother against him—it lingered.

It always would.

He stole a glance at his uncle, only to find Mr. D's sharp eyes already on him, watching with that far-too-knowing look Luke had grown to hate. Or maybe appreciate—he hadn't decided yet.

Luke wondered what his uncle saw. What he *knew,* or at least suspected. Mr. D had always been frustratingly good at piecing things together without Luke saying a word. But, like always, he wouldn't bring it up first. He never did. That wasn't how he worked—not in moments like this, not even in their therapy sessions.

Mr. D insisted Luke's healing had to come from him, that the answers had to be his own. Even when his uncle guided him, he never handed anything over outright. Luke had to connect the dots, take the first step, say the words out loud. Somehow, that bled into everything else.

Sometimes, it drove Luke insane—the way his uncle just *waited,* letting him wrestle with things alone.

But other times, like now, it was… almost a relief.

"Well, the Colchis Bulls, they're interesting monsters. The last I heard of them being actually relevant was with that boy the Queen liked—what was his name again? Jack?" Mr. D mused suddenly, swirling his drink lazily before taking a sip, his gaze sliding away from Luke.

"Jason, Uncle. The Argonaut," Luke corrected, a touch of exasperation slipping into his voice.

The tension in his shoulders eased, if only a little. He found himself quietly grateful—Mr. D always had a way of pulling him out of heavy topics, even if it was through his usual roundabout nonsense.

"Yes, yes, him." Mr. D waved his Diet Coke can toward Luke with a lazy flick of his wrist. "The yoking of the bulls to a plow, because the brat wanted the Golden Fleece from Aeëtes. And that man, instead of just saying no and sending him off, wasted his own time with ridiculous tasks only to lose in the end. *Typical."*

A frown crept across his face as his gaze shifted back to the barriers.

For a moment, he said nothing, his eyes fixed on the faint shimmer outside. Slowly, the faintest purple glow began to bleed into his stare.

“It’s curious that they’re here now,” he murmured, his voice quieter, more serious. “Feels almost like…”

Luke didn’t need him to finish. He knew exactly what his uncle was getting at.

The bulls had been one of the obstacles during the quest for the Golden Fleece—and now, here they were, at Camp Half-Blood of all places. The barriers weakened. The Camp full of vulnerable demigods.

It was too coincidental to ignore.

Luke’s gaze drifted, landing on Thalia’s tree. That familiar tightness coiled in his chest as he took in its decaying state, but he shoved the feeling aside. He remembered how, in the books, Kronos had wanted Thalia—another child of the Big Three, a potential candidate for the prophecy, someone he could sway to his side.

But Luke doubted that now.

For some reason—more suspicion than fact—he was fairly certain the Fates had already settled on Percy.

*The Fates…*

Luke’s brow furrowed, and he clicked his tongue as their image rose in his mind, dragging unpleasant feelings along with it.

Who’s to say those old hags weren’t involved in this too? It would be right up their alley. The Colchis Bulls showing up now could easily be some symbolic sign—a nod to the Golden Fleece quest that was bound to happen, or something along those lines.

*A parallel.*

It felt too deliberate to be random.

Wasn’t this the kind of thing storytellers used all the time? Foreshadowing. Setting the stage for what was to come.

The thought left a bitter taste in his mouth. Pawns in some kind of game—that’s all they were. Their barriers rotting, Thalia dying again, and for what?

Luke shook his head lightly, forcing himself to focus. He had to do something—not just sit around bemoaning and brooding. He did that enough already, and it never helped. If anything, it only made things worse. *Chris’s face flashed in his mind for a moment* . Drawing a steady breath, he turned to his uncle, his expression serious.

“Uncle, the barriers are weaker, and Thalia’s tree is dying. Soon, we’ll be exposed, and with all these demigods gathered here…”

His voice faltered as his mind flashed to *that day* —the horde of monsters, an endless tide that had swallowed the entire horizon.

The memory made his blood run cold, but he pushed through it.

“Monsters would trample us. It would be a massacre.”

“The situation is being discussed thoroughly by the gods, and plans are being made, though there are some complications,” Mr. D said, his tone sharp as his gaze shifted from the tree to lock onto Luke. “In any case, Olympus is alerted, and the gods are aware. But Chiron being fired will be a complication—one that will bring us plenty of headaches…”

He trailed off, his expression darkening slightly, and for a brief moment, a cruel glint flickered in his eyes. A hint of dark amusement crept into his voice as he added, “But, fortunately, the substitute will listen. He doesn’t have a choice.”

Mr. D leaned back with a smug, almost languid air, like a cat that had just gotten into the cream. His smirk widened slightly as he added, almost carelessly, “He owes me. Twice over.”

*Did the new guy arrive already?* Luke wondered, his thoughts drifting.

He couldn’t help but think about the books and the cannibal asshole who’d taken over in them. If it was him… Luke shook his head. He never understood why the gods would’ve chosen that guy of all people. Maybe it was because the man was a coward, someone who wouldn’t dare act against the gods—or couldn’t, really, after being sent to the Field of Punishment to starve for eternity.

That kind of torment had to mess with anyone’s head, leave them a little broken, a little too far gone to act out.

Still, Luke *really* hoped it wasn’t him.

In fact, he hoped the new director was so far under Mr. D’s thumb that he might as well be a puppet. That would make everything easier, at least.

Not that it helped how he felt about the situation. Luke was *still* mad that Chiron had been kicked out and, honestly, had not even started to get over it.

This whole situation was just shitty.

“Annie and Percy bolted to talk to Chiron the moment I mentioned he was leaving,” Luke commented, rubbing his chin as his scowl deepened. “I was wondering why he was in such a hurry, but now it makes sense—the substitute is *already here* .”

Mr. D raised his brows. “We held Chiron here as long as we could by delaying the substitution, but summer has started, and the demigods are coming back.” His tone grew heavy, his expression briefly clouded with tiredness as he muttered, “Some of them, at least.”

Recovering himself, he straightened, his usual air of nonchalance returning, though there was a flicker of something sharper in his voice, almost mad. “So, it was inevitable, I’m afraid.”

Luke clicked his tongue and averted his gaze. It was true, but he didn't want to agree—it wasn't fair. His hand pressed against his lips, hiding the way they twisted in frustration.

"Well, speaking of Peter Johnson and Annie Bell…" Mr. D leaned forward, resting his chin on his hands, his eyes glinting as they fixed on Luke. "You mentioned something about that newcomer they brought here. Something urgent, wasn't it?"

"Ah, right." Luke had mentioned it in passing earlier, but with everything else going on, he'd almost forgotten about the Cyclops inside Camp. "The newcomer's a Cyclops. He helped us take down the second bull—seems young, and he's really attached to Percy."

Mr. D took a long sip of his drink, grimacing as he swallowed. "Of course. Little star hero Peter. Who else? Fame's gone to his head now that he's done the *minor* task of preventing a war, and now he thinks he can drag any monster he finds off the streets into *my* Camp. And we have to host them." He sighed dramatically, as if the whole thing personally exhausted him. "But I suppose I'll have to let the one-eyed brat stay after the favor he's done for us. Though—" he wrinkled his nose in distaste "—hosting a little monster in *my* house isn't exactly something I'm thrilled about."

Guests —*real* ones—usually stayed in the Big House. Sure, Cabin Eleven could technically serve that purpose, given Luke's father was the god of travelers and all, but it was already crammed full of unclaimed demigods. And let's be real—the gods didn't like anyone but their own kids hanging around their cabins.

There was also the unspoken rule. Shoving a guest into a crowded cabin full of brats instead of housing them somewhere with the people in charge felt… wrong. A faux pas, even.

But Luke wasn't worried. Mr. D wouldn't have to deal with it for long. Tyson would be claimed today—Luke was sure of it.

Aside from the things he *knew,* it just made sense. Poseidon wouldn't miss the chance.

Percy was here, and Tyson stuck to him like glue. Luke could *feel* it—Poseidon would claim his monstrous son, wrapping him in the protection of Cabin Three like it was some grand gesture. A way to prove he could play *father of the year.*

Luke sighed, dragging his hands down his face, his thumbs pressing into his eyes as if that could wipe away the exhaustion settling in behind them.

*At least* one thing had been dealt with easily. Or would be. Whatever.

But the barriers… that was something else. A quest felt inevitable at this point. Honestly, Luke thought it was necessary. The situation was getting worse by the day.

"Uncle, has the Oracle stirred?"

Mr. D's expression darkened immediately, his gaze sharpening as he shot Luke a look. "No. And I told you—the gods are handling it."

*This again.*

“Uncle, a quest is needed,” Luke pressed, the words feeling strange even as he said them. He could hardly believe he was the one pushing for this—but things had changed.

*Everything* had changed.

“It could save us.”

“Quests, quests, quests,” Mr. D mocked, waving his hand lazily. “Heroes and their precious quests.”

He leaned forward, eyes flickering with a deep purple glow as he fixed Luke with a stare. His voice dropped, slow and final.

“It’s being handled, Luke. If the Oracle speaks, so be it. Until then, we find other ways to deal with this.”

They locked eyes for a long moment. Luke’s scowl deepened, but after a tense pause, he gave a reluctant nod. His uncle wasn’t going to budge.

*Obviously.*

Dionysus leaned back, his eyes narrowing just slightly as the glow faded, leaving behind their usual blue. For a second, Luke caught the flicker of suspicion in his gaze.

But then, with a lazy stretch, Mr. D rose to his feet, waving a hand over his shoulder as if the whole conversation had been a waste of time.

“Come on, Lucy, let’s get to dinner. It’s late enough, and Chiron’s absence is probably making the brats restless.” He paused for a beat, then added, almost like an afterthought, “And the Cyclops too, I guess.”

Luke sighed and fell into step behind his uncle, following him toward the Dining Pavilion.

As they neared, Uncle D waved him off with a casual flick of his hand, dismissing him toward the Hermes table. Luke didn’t argue, but his eyes lingered for a moment, catching the faint vindictive glint in Mr. D’s eyes as he veered toward his own spot.

Someone was already sitting there.

*The substitute,* Luke realized.

He squinted, unable to help himself. The man wasn’t as old as Luke had imagined. There was a worn, tired look about him—dark hair, dark eyes, and built like someone who hadn’t let himself go soft. Definitely not ugly either, which threw Luke off. He’d expected someone… *worse.* But the guy sat there with a kind of stillness, his face carefully blank as if nothing could unsettle him.

Even as Mr. D approached, leaning in with that slow, almost predatory air, the man didn’t flinch. Mr. D said something—undoubtedly sharp—but Luke couldn’t catch it from this distance. Even so, the man barely reacted, just a slight twitch and a narrowing of his eyes—

subtle enough that Luke only noticed because he hadn't blinked, watching him closely while pretending to keep his focus elsewhere.

Still, Luke kept squinting at the guy, like staring hard enough might peel back the surface and show him what made the man tick. Something about him felt… undeserving, like he hadn't done anything to *earn* that seat.

Sure, he wasn't Tantalus. That was a relief. But even so, it didn't sit right.

*Chiron* should be the one sitting there. Not some stranger.

Huffing, Luke forced himself to look away, shifting his focus to the other cabins as they filed into the pavilion. Travis and Connor were among them, naturally making a fuss as they entered—because God forbid they do *anything* without causing a scene. Still, even their antics felt more subdued these days, wrapped in a thin layer of wariness that hadn't been there before.

The rest of the demigods followed suit, moving like they were part of some military drill—backs straight, shoulders tense, weapons always within reach. The easy, carefree energy that used to hang over Camp had long since faded, replaced by something harder.

Sharper.

And then, behind them, came Percy, Annabeth, and Tyson—the last to arrive, slipping in like they didn't want to attract attention. Or, more specifically, like Percy and Annabeth didn't.

But they did anyway.

The moment they stepped inside, every camper's attention zeroed in on Tyson. Luke watched as the room subtly shifted—shoulders stiffening, eyes narrowing, hands instinctively drifting closer to their weapons.

No one unsheathed anything, at least.

Luke's gaze swept over his own cabin, and with a sharp glance, he signaled for his siblings to sit down. They did, though not without hesitation.

Somewhere in the pavilion, someone spoke up—loud enough for everyone to hear.

"Who invited *that* here?"

Luke's frown deepened. *Unkind,* he thought, his eyes flicking toward Percy and Annabeth as they visibly tensed.

Tyson, on the other hand, either didn't hear or didn't understand. His attention was elsewhere, wide-eyed and full of wonder as he took in the Dining Pavilion like it was the most incredible thing he'd ever seen.

And it probably was, Luke realized, remembering the boy-Cyclops had been living on the streets.

Despite himself, his chest gave a small pang.

“Well, our great hero *Peter* Jackson is back,” Mr. D drawled loudly, effortlessly capturing everyone’s attention and silencing the entire pavilion. He accepted a plate from a passing satyr without sparing so much as a glance. “My millennium is now complete.”

Luke resisted the urge to roll his eyes. His uncle couldn’t pass up a single opportunity to needle Percy. It was probably half the reason Percy didn’t like him—though, to be fair, Mr. D didn’t seem particularly fond of Percy either.

Gritting his teeth, Percy responded as politely as he could manage. “It’s *Percy* Jackson, sir.”

“Yes, yes, *whatever* , as you youngsters like to say these days.” Mr. D waved dismissively, taking a leisurely sip of his Diet Coke.

He leaned slightly toward the stranger sitting beside him, lowering his voice just enough to seem conspiratorial—but not enough that anyone could actually miss it. “Well, *old friend,* I’m not sure how much news has trickled down to you after all these centuries, but this one —” he nodded lazily in Percy’s direction, “—was *quite* the center of attention last year.”

Percy’s irritation was obvious, but what caught Luke’s attention was the substitute’s reaction —or lack of one. His dark eyes flicked to Percy for the briefest moment before he spoke.

“I’m not completely unaware of the recent events, Lord Dionysus.”

*“Lord,* huh? How funny,” Mr. D mused, a flicker of vindictive satisfaction crossing his face. “In any case—” he waved a hand lazily toward Tyson— “you, big brat, sit here. Let Peter Johnson go sit at his empty table while we decide what to do with you.”

Percy’s eyes widened. His mouth opened immediately to protest, shooting Tyson a quick, reassuring glance. Luke caught it, but he also noticed something else—Tyson, despite his size, looked nervous. *Scared,* even.

It was strange, he could admit, seeing that kind of fear from a monster, especially one as big as Tyson. But it still stirred something in Luke—a flicker of sympathy he didn’t bother pushing away.

Tyson was just a kid, no matter how massive he was.

“Tyson saved Camp!” Percy blurted, stepping forward. “He crushed that bull! If it weren’t for him, the whole place would’ve burned to the ground.”

Mr. D gave him a long, unimpressed look. “Yes, Peter, I’m aware. But, alas—” he gestured dramatically to the pavilion— “there’s no place for him to sit, is there? And no place for him to stay?”

Mr. D arched a brow and shot Percy a pointed look, the kind that practically screamed *are you really this stupid?* A few kids around the pavilion stifled giggles, and Percy’s face flushed, though Luke couldn’t tell if it was from anger or embarrassment.

“If you don’t have any more protests,” Mr. D said with a bored sigh, “go back to your empty table.”

Percy’s mouth twisted, like there were at least ten things he wanted to say—none of which, Luke hoped, would actually come out. Percy had a sharp tongue, and Luke knew Mr. D wouldn’t hesitate to make him regret using it.

Through gritted teeth, Percy turned to Tyson and forced out, “I’ll be right here, buddy. Don’t worry.”

Tyson’s face lit up as he nodded, his loud response echoing across the pavilion. “I believe you. You’re my friend.”

It was so simple—so honest—that Luke felt a pang in his chest. Cute in a way, but also kind of heartbreaking.

Percy and Tyson made their way to their seats, while Annabeth had already settled at her table, keeping her distance from the whole ordeal.

Soon after, dinner arrived, followed by the offerings.

“Hermes,” Luke muttered half-heartedly, tossing part of his dinner into the flames without ceremony.

He wasn’t in the mood for this. It didn’t matter. His father never answered anyway. Hermes had been silent for a long time now, and Luke was still angry about it. Chiron had been fired—with his father’s vote, no less. Chris had not been claimed, even after Luke had *asked.*

*Abigail.*

Really, why *should* he honor a god like that? One who didn’t lift a finger to help him.

But duty was duty. This patronage thing—it was part of the deal, even if it felt hollow. Luke figured if Hermes had the freedom to pick and choose which part of his responsibilities to care about, then maybe Luke should have the same luxury.

*Not that I’d get away with it,* he thought bitterly.

With a sigh, Luke trudged back to the table, the rest of his dinner in hand. His fingers slipped into his pocket, rolling the card inside between them.

Then a sharp, blaring sound echoed through the pavilion. Luke’s head snapped up just as one of the satyrs lowered the horn, and all eyes turned to the front where Mr. D was rising to his feet with the enthusiasm of someone being dragged from a nap.

“Good evening and all that,” he began, voice dripping with boredom as the conversations around the pavilion faded into silence. “As you brats can see, we have a new activities director, for *obvious* reasons, which I’m sure you all know because none of you can mind your own business.”

Luke watched as Mr. D waved a hand lazily toward the stranger at his side. “Anyway—this is Pentheus,” he said, gesturing for the man to stand.

The man stood slowly, his face unreadable as his dark eyes swept over the room.

“Let’s hear his words,” Mr. D drawled, flopping back into his seat.

“Good evening. As Lord Dionysus mentioned—I’m Pentheus.”

Luke caught the slight curl of Mr. D’s lips, the flicker of amusement in his eyes, like he was in on some joke no one else understood.

But Luke did. He recognized the name.

This was the man who had denied Dionysus’ divinity—and paid for it.

Realization settled over him. *So this is who my uncle chose.* Someone firmly under his thumb. And yeah, Luke had to admit—it was a smart choice. Pentheus wasn’t going to cross Dionysus again. Not after being ripped limb from limb by the Maenads.

*By his own mother.*

No, this guy wasn’t stepping out of line anytime soon.

“I look forward to our time together,” Pentheus continued, his voice smooth and polite, but stiff—like he’d repeated the same line more times than he cared to admit. “And I look forward to interacting with you all this summer.”

Lazily, Mr. D clapped, the sound light and slow. The satyrs followed his lead, and soon enough, the campers joined in—some more reluctantly than others.

When the clapping died down, Pentheus straightened, clasping his hands behind his back. His expression remained stoic as he added, “I will not disrupt the schedule or activities put in place by my predecessor.”

Luke noticed the faint glint of satisfaction in his uncle’s eyes at that.

“I understand I am new to you all,” Pentheus continued, “but I will do my best to fill the shoes left by the hero-maker, Chiron.”

He paused briefly, scanning the room. “It’s my understanding that he had a patrol schedule in place?”

Clarisse stood almost immediately, her expression hard and set in that no-nonsense way she carried herself with these days—too serious, really.

“Yes,” she said, her voice firm. “The whole Camp rotates for patrol duty.”

“We will keep it,” Pentheus replied evenly. He cleared his throat, straightening with a stiff sort of formality. “I believe it’s only right that we take a moment to properly recognize

today's heroes. From what I understand, some demigods showed great courage in defending the Camp's barriers against the monsters."

His gaze swept across the Dining Pavilion, scanning the campers.

"Let's applaud Clarisse, daughter of War," Pentheus announced, listing off the names of several Ares campers.

Clarisse nodded sharply, while the others straightened in their seats, clearly proud of themselves. One of them wasn't there—the kid with the burned face, likely still in the infirmary—but the rest soaked up the attention as the pavilion clapped.

Pentheus continued, "Annabeth, daughter of Wisdom. Percy, son of the Sea. And Luke, son of the Thief."

The Hermes table *exploded.*

Luke barely had time to react before his brats were on their feet, cheering loud enough to make a scene. A few whistled, while others clapped him hard on the back. Travis and Connor immediately seized the opportunity to cause more of a scene, bowing with exaggerated flair.

"All hail our supreme leader!" Travis declared, his voice carrying across the table.

"An honor, your highness," Connor added, grinning as he clasped his hands and lowered his head in mock reverence.

Luke rolled his eyes but didn't bother hiding the fond smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

His brats were so silly.

But it wasn't over.

Pentheus hesitated, the briefest flicker of uncertainty crossing his face before he turned toward the main table. Dionysus sat there, watching him with one eyebrow raised, as if daring him to get this wrong. Beside him, Tyson shifted awkwardly in his seat, clearly uncomfortable under the weight of the attention.

"And… it seems this cyclops also aided in the defense of Camp," Pentheus said carefully. "As such, it has been decided that he will stay."

The Dining Pavilion *erupted.*

But this time, it wasn't like his cabin's outburst. There was no celebration in the noise—just outrage. Accusations and questions tangled together, voices rising over one another, some angry, some laced with fear.

Luke watched as eyes snapped to Annabeth, who sat stiff. Her face was carefully blank, but the tension rolling off her was obvious. The Athena campers closed ranks around her, shielding her from the brunt of the stares.

Percy wasn't so lucky.

He sat at his empty table, glaring at the crowd like he was ready to fight every single one of them if it came to that. Indignation burned across his face, but there was no one to deflect the attention—no siblings to stand between him and the rest of Camp.

He bore the weight of their stares alone.

Chaos followed. Voices clashed, campers shouting over each other—loud and angry. Percy was on his feet now, arguing with a few kids from the Apollo table, his words sharp. Luke barely caught what was being said, too busy trying to quiet his own cabin as they added to the noise. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Mr. D slowly rise from his seat, moving with that lazy disinterest he always showed when things got too loud for his liking, but he had to interfere anyway since he was the one in charge.

The look on his face said it all —*he wanted no part in this.*

And then—silence.

Luke turned, immediately understanding the sudden hush.

Above Tyson's head, glowing faintly in the air, stood a symbol Luke recognized instantly. One he'd only seen once before, but *knew* was coming.

*Poseidon's trident.*

Everyone stared. Tyson blinked up at it, confused, and waved his hand through the glowing sign like he thought it was a bug.

But Luke's gaze shifted to Percy.

His face had gone pale, eyes wide and locked on the trident like it was some kind of nightmare.

"Well," Mr. D's voice cut through the silence, uninterested—though Luke could tell he was quietly pleased. Probably because it meant the boy-Cyclops wouldn't be lingering around *his* house anymore. "It seems the big brat has somewhere to stay now."

His gaze drifted lazily to Percy. "Well, Peter Johnson, looks like you're not alone anymore. Tyson will go to Cabin Three, as a son of Poseidon. Congratulations and all that."

Luke didn't miss the way Percy's shoulders tensed, his eyes flicking to Tyson, who was grinning—completely unaware of the weight behind what had just happened. To him, sharing a cabin with Percy was the best news he could've gotten.

But Percy clearly did. From where Luke sat, it was obvious he wasn't thrilled. *Childish,* Luke thought at first, but he couldn't really blame him. It was a shock—anyone would've been thrown by it.

Around them, a few campers snickered, but most just stared, disbelief plastered across their faces. A cyclops, *inside* Camp Half-Blood—living in a demigod's cabin—felt insane.

Luke understood the sentiment. He really did. But still…

His eyes drifted to Tyson, who was practically skipping to sit next to Percy, completely oblivious to the tension around him.

Tyson clearly wasn't like the monsters they knew.

Mr. D waved a hand lazily as he sank back into his chair. "Now let's eat. *In silence,* if you will. The noise grates my nerves, and I doubt any of you want to end up as dolphins."

The pavilion quieted down fast after that. Where there had been tense silence before, now it felt more like a funeral procession. No one dared to speak louder than a whisper.

Luke figured no one wanted to find out if Mr. D was bluffing.

He poked at his food, letting his eyes wander to the main table every so often. The substitute's face stayed locked in that same stoic mask, like it was frozen that way, eating with the easy grace of someone who'd always been part of the elite.

Luke frowned.

*Him being here changes things.*

Chapter End Notes

So, a conversation—with a lot of mythology thrown in, as always, because I love adding those details, lol. And yeah, Luke being assertive and active for once, actually proposing a quest, while Mr. D, in all his hatred for heroes, quests, and everything in between, just shuts it down. Instead, he makes vague promises that the gods are doing something. And maybe they are… but maybe it'll be too late.

Then… the substitute. It's Pentheus. I chose him because one of the things Dionysus really hated was people denying his divinity—like, a lot. And Pentheus did exactly that. I imagine the gods wouldn't have looked too kindly on it, but since he was generally respectful to them—just not… Dionysus, because of the whole party god, taking things out of the appropriate way perspective—they tolerated him. Still, Dionysus choosing him definitely raised some eyebrows. And, well, that's the point—to make them question whether it was really such a good idea to kick Chiron out in favor of someone obviously less suited for the role.

Tyson is claimed, and Percy being absolutely mortified by having a monster as a brother—especially with the camp struggling with barrier problems and now a monster inside—makes it even worse. But, well, that won't be the focus. Pentheus being here changes

things… but since Mr. D is basically using him as a puppet, things won't go too far off the rails.

In any case, thanks for reading! I appreciate every comment, and it doesn't matter if you're late to the party!

So… did you guys expect Pentheus? Lol.

# Chapter 51: SoM - Flock

Chapter Summary

> Capture the Flag—everything is going fine. Luke is finally not the guy getting the flag for once in ages. But guarding it with Inês? Yeah, not easy. He even managed to defend it from the brats (Percy is absolutely going to grow into a menace).
>
> And then… it all goes to hell.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Things were different, and Luke... Luke found it all a little too suspicious.

Maybe it was just his paranoia talking, but he couldn't shake the feeling that these changes didn't mean anything good. And with his luck, they probably didn't. *Not knowing* only made it worse.

He shoved the thought aside, snarling internally. *This isn't a book,* he reminded himself, firm. *This is real. This is my life.*

Whether the pep talk actually worked or not, he couldn't tell. But trying at least made him feel like he was doing *something,* even if his mind kept circling the same problem—or lack of one.

Pentheus did his job and never crossed the line.

He followed Chiron's routines to the letter—kept the patrols running, didn't add anything new to the schedules, didn't stir the pot. It was almost like the guy wasn't even there. Luke only ever saw him during dinner, and even then, Pentheus barely left an impression.

It was painfully obvious he was just a puppet for Mr. D—which, if Luke thought about it, was probably the whole point.

Pentheus was so deeply under Mr. D's thumb that even if he *wanted* to act on his own, he couldn't. And the gods tolerated him enough—though his whole denying-a-god's-divinity thing had definitely made things… questionable—for him to stick around.

For now, at least.

That kind of talk wasn't something the gods took lightly, and with him around impressionable brats—brats who, let's be honest, had already proven themselves more than capable of rebellion if pushed too far and were the source of the current mess on top of that—

Well.

If Pentheus ended up getting kicked out, Luke wouldn't be shedding any tears over it.

But honestly? The guy was about as useful as a post.

Chiron had been the better choice by far.

And that was the point, Luke knew. His uncle wanted to prove how much better Chiron was by comparison.

But still…

The other shift was Lee.

With Chiron gone, Lee had stepped in as the new archery instructor. He was doing well enough for someone new to the role, but the added weight of head counselor duties and running the infirmary—the part of the job that had also been Chiron's—was clearly starting to wear him down.

If Luke thought about it, Lee was substituting for Chiron too.

Luke had been helping Lee where he could, offering the younger man the benefit of his years of experience and whatever wisdom he could pass along. Lee seemed to appreciate it, but the strain still showed. Experience wasn't something Luke could simply hand over. Lee would have to struggle his way through until he found his footing.

That was just how it went.

At least Lee didn't have to worry about being overthrown or dragged into Camp politics. Luke remembered those days. The thought made him grimace and sigh.

When Luke glanced up, his eyes met Inês's. She was perched on a rock, watching him like some kind of royalty gazing down at the plebeians—or, in this case, just Luke.

"What is it, Saint Luke? Sighing like a martyr?" Inês drawled, her tone thick with mockery. She glanced down, inspecting her nails with feigned disinterest. "I'll have you know *I* too am suffering through this. I'd much rather be in bed than out here, playing this stupid game."

She leaned back in an exaggerated pose, striking the kind of stance you'd expect from a supermodel in a magazine—not a demigod dressed in Greek armor, standing in the middle of the forest, guarding a flag. The *Aphrodite* flag, no less.

A miracle, really.

"I see your suffering—sitting there while I patrol the place," Luke replied dryly, casting her a sideways glance. "Weren't you the one who said you'd make a *very* good bodyguard when we divided the roles? Insisted you'd be the perfect flag guardian?"

He jutted his lips forward, giving her an exaggerated once-over.

Inês raised a brow, planting a hand on her waist.

“You’re doing such a good job, Inês Portugal. I can really see what a great example you are.”

Her brows shot to her hairline as she stood. “Wait a second.” She held up a hand, then jabbed a finger at him. “You can’t complain. *You’re* the one who usually snatches the flag anyway. You chose to sit here with me and leave the little brats to handle the real job while we lounge around.”

“Aren’t you observant these days?” Luke quipped, strolling over to a rock and collapsing onto it. He rested his hands on his knees, shooting her a mocking glance.

“This is your flag, *Lady.* Cabin Ten’s in charge this time, and their cabin leader is right here.”

Inês pulled a face, contorting her lips as she rolled her eyes, not bothering to respond. Instead, she made her way over and sat beside him, propping her chin in her hands.

“Let’s be real, though. We’re both doing this for a reason—and yours is the same as mine.” She paused, waving a hand vaguely. “Well, not exactly.”

Turning to Luke, she met his gaze. Her brown eyes, serious despite her playful tone, shimmered faintly in that unsettling way Aphrodite’s kids’ eyes sometimes did. A trick of the light, or just them being them. Luke had learned not to ask.

“We’re *old*,” she said simply.

“I’m old. You’re still on your way there,” Luke corrected, poking her side.

She swatted his hand away with a glare, pulling a very unimpressed face.

“You know what I mean,” she said, leaning back, planting her hands behind her on the rock. “This whole successor thing. I know I’m testing Silena—seeing how she handles leadership, especially out here in battle. I already know she’s great at relationships, at managing people. She’s stubborn too, which…”

Her voice softened, hesitation creeping in. “Which is a good thing. Cabin Ten needs that.”

She glanced at him from the corner of her eye, her tone cautious. “But you… Cabin Eleven doesn’t have a successor in line yet.”

Luke glanced at her, then frowned, shifting his gaze as he rubbed at his cheek.

His own situation was… complicated.

He *should* have chosen someone years ago—probably the day he turned eighteen, if he was being honest. But he hadn’t.

He didn’t trust them to handle the cabin. *Too young.* The older ones left as soon as they could, and Luke stayed. He told himself it wasn’t time yet, that he could put it off a little

longer. One year turned into two. Then more. His siblings relied on him—*expected* him to fix things. To lead. They weren't ready, and Luke hadn't done much to change that.

But now he was starting to realize he couldn't keep avoiding it.

The war with Kronos loomed closer, the weight of it pressing down harder, more apparent with each passing day. *At least to him.*

Things were shifting. He didn't know if those changes would follow the path laid out in the books or twist into something else entirely.

*And if something happened to him…*

So, he was testing them. Even if none of his brats truly seemed to fit the role.

But maybe they didn't need to—not yet. Not while he was still around.

Luke could admit it—he *needed* a second. The weight of everything happening was starting to wear him down, and when he was tired and stressed… he didn't want to admit it, but he did, grudgingly.

He got moody—*seu Lunga*[1]*,* his grandma used to say. Inês, on the other hand, called him *Velho do Restelo*[2].

Aubrey had Axel, even if he had been just a guest, and then Luke when she chose him as her successor.

Luke had… no one.

Not even one of the unclaimed. They were too young. Kat had left. Levi—

*Levi had died.*

Luke shoved the old pain down.

"I know," he said finally, his gaze fixed on the stream nearby. It was a quieter spot, off to the side and far from the chaos—very unlike the spots Cabin Five usually chose for their flag when they were leading. "I'm working on it."

Inês turned to face him, her expression scrunching in that way it always did when she was about to say something—probably something about feelings, or how he was just one person, or maybe that he should open up more. Whatever speech she had planned, Luke could see it coming, and he had no patience for it. Not now.

So he cut her off before she had the chance.

"So, Cabin Ten as the leader now." He picked up a rock, rolling it between his fingers as he avoided her gaze. "What's it like doing something without Cabin Five for once?"

She glared at him but let out a huff, replying anyway. “How funny. But honestly, it’s a pain. Cabin Six seems to think this means they’ll have an easy win.” Her eyes narrowed with determination. “They’ll find out soon enough it won’t be.”

Inês drew in a deep breath, brushing her hair back with a flick of her fingers. “Though, having Cabin Five here would make things easier. They’re so battle-obsessed, you barely have to do anything when they’re involved. But Clarisse—she’s at the borders, patrolling. *Again*.”

Her fingers trailed through her hair absently as her tone shifted. “You know, she actually convinced Pentheus to let Cabin Five handle most of the patrols after talking to him.” She shrugged, her movements light, but the tension in her voice betrayed her worry. “At first, I didn’t mind—less work for me—but now it’s starting to bother me.”

Inês’ expression darkened, brows drawing together. “We’re in a bad spot, and what can we do? She’s exhausting herself with all this patrolling, and… well…” Her gaze flicked to Luke, her lips pressing into a thin line. “We’re in this for the long haul. The borders are barely holding, and we have to keep patrolling to stop anything from getting through. If she burns out now, it’s…”

“Dangerous,” Luke finished, the rock stilling in his hand as he turned to face her, his expression suddenly serious.

He had noticed it too.

Clarisse had grown far too serious lately, her face rarely shifting from its stoic expression. Her back was always straight, her spear never far from her side. The usual annoyed, peeved look she used to wear—one Luke had grown accustomed to—was gone, replaced with something far more severe.

She didn’t even react to the Stoll brothers anymore. Their regular attempts to irritate her—pranks and all—went completely ignored. That alone had unnerved Luke’s little brothers enough for them to mention it to him. They’d even asked if Clarisse had been possessed.

Luke had shrugged off their concern with a small smile, offering something vague about head counselor duties being heavier these days. It wasn’t a lie—the pressure on all of them was heavier than usual—but deep down, he knew the truth was more complicated.

Clarisse was taking the responsibility of patrolling the borders far too seriously, behaving as though she and her cabin were the only ones capable of protecting Camp. It was like she believed the burden of defending their home rested solely on Cabin Five’s shoulders, completely ignoring the fact that Camp had several other cabins and dozens of demigods equally obligated to share that responsibility.

He knew why.

It was that need—to make up for her actions, to prove herself, or maybe a mix of it all.

“Well,” Inês’s voice broke the silence as she stood, stretching lazily as if she hadn’t been sitting idly while Luke did all the work. “We’re here, and we’re not going to let the brats take our flag.” She pressed her hands to her cheeks in an exaggerated gesture. “Imagine the shame—us, two of the oldest demigods, losing to a bunch of kids.”

Luke snorted, shaking his head as he stood as well.

“For real, that’d be embarrassing.”

Inês flicked her hair over her shoulder and started to walk off, only to pause and glance back at him. “Those Stoll brats you sent to grab the flag—are they any good?”

“They’re pretty tricky,” Luke replied, grabbing his sword and inspecting the blade. He debated whether to sheathe it or keep it out and decided on the latter. “They’re clever, cunning, and they work well together. I have confidence they’ll find a way, especially with the two of them teaming up.”

Inês hummed thoughtfully, her tone casual, though her next words were anything but. “Do you think they’re as good as you? Or at least have the potential to be?”

Luke froze, his hand pausing mid-check of the blade as he turned to look at her. Inês stood there, pretending to be asking an innocent question—one relevant to their current situation. But her expression didn’t fool him. She was trying to get him to talk about the succession again.

This tricky clown.

Still, he couldn’t deny her question made him think. He’d already been turning the matter over in his mind for a while now, but it was still too early to make any decisions.

At least, that’s what he kept telling himself.

*Connor’s a smart boy,* Luke thought, despite his doubts. *He knows how to lead—handles Travis well enough, even being younger. That’s something.*

But his train of thought was interrupted by a sudden, sharp shout.

Luke’s head snapped around, and he froze at the sight before him. Tyson, participating as a member of Cabin Three despite all the protests from the other demigods, was barreling through the battlefield. It had embarrassed Percy at the start—*the kid’s so weird about this,* Luke thought—but honestly, having a cyclops around was a huge advantage.

Tyson was plowing through a mass of demigods, though none seemed particularly interested in engaging him. Instead, they scattered in all directions, screaming like a bunch of headless chickens. The chaos left Tyson with a perfectly clear path to the flag, though he appeared confused by the reaction. His large, childlike eye darted around, a hurt expression flickering across his face as he took in the screaming demigods.

*I’m going to have to talk to those brats about letting the enemy get this close again,* Luke thought in exasperation. But then, something clicked. His mind perked up, racing to latch

onto a suspicion. His gaze narrowed, scanning the chaos around him with sharp precision.

*This smells like one of Annabeth's plans,* he thought. *Use the cyclops as a distraction—create chaos, stir up confusion, and slip in under cover with that invisibility cap of hers to steal the flag right out from under our noses.*

Luke tensed, his muscles coiling as he stepped back slightly, positioning himself closer to Inês without ever taking his eyes off the scene or letting his guard drop.

*Stealing from the son of the Thief,* he thought with a faint, internal snort. *What an irony.*

He leaned toward Inês, his voice low. "Keep an eye here. Annabeth's around—I'm sure of it." His gaze remained fixed ahead, scanning for any signs of movement. "Just do what you do best."

From the corner of his eye, he saw Inês's lips curl into a sharp, petty grin. Her tone, laced with mock sweetness, carried a dangerous edge. "Don't worry. I'll make sure she learns a lesson she won't forget."

Luke snorted. "She has that invisibility cap of hers—"

"I know," Inês interrupted, stepping back slowly, her eyes scanning the area like a predator stalking its prey. A sharp glint flashed in her gaze. "That's not a problem for me—"

Her head snapped toward a spot ahead, and a wide grin spread across her face. She kept moving with deliberate grace, her steps almost theatrical, like she was strutting down a runway. Luke's eyes flicked to where she was looking and caught the subtle rustle of leaves, as if someone had just passed through.

Inês let out a girlish giggle, her sing-song voice carrying through the air. "You can run, little Annie, but I know where you are."

Rolling his eyes, Luke turned his focus back to the chaos. He readied himself to step into the fray and deal with Tyson, who was now trying to fend off Luke's brats. They had finally decided to do their jobs and defend the flag. As for Inês—Luke trusted her to handle her part, and he had no doubt she would. Her pettiness knew no bounds, and today she seemed particularly motivated to prove it.

But just as he took a step forward, the water in the nearby stream exploded without warning, surging straight toward him. Luke's eyes widened, but he didn't stay frozen. His instincts kicked in, and he tensed his thighs, launching himself backward and crossing to the other side of the clearing in a burst of speed.

The water crashed down where he had just been standing, drenching the ground. Straightening, Luke tilted his head, raising an unimpressed brow as his gaze landed on Percy standing across the stream. The boy's hands were raised, his face scrunched in concentration, clearly struggling to maintain control over the water.

Luke noted it absently in the back of his mind, cracking his neck as he shifted his focus. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Tyson being handled by his and Inês's campers. They were working together, using clever teamwork to keep the cyclops running in circles and away from the flag.

*Good. At least they're learning something.*

"Well, Percy, looks like your opponent today is me," Luke said casually, his tone light as he began to pace in a slow semicircle. He kept a deliberate distance from the stream, positioning himself between the boy and the flag. His eyes stayed locked on Percy, carefully gauging his movements.

*Another water attack? A swordfight? Maybe both?*

Whatever the kid tried, Luke would handle it. After all, it would be extremely embarrassing to lose to a brat.

Percy's eyes narrowed, his expression sharpening with determination. Luke mirrored the tension, muscles coiling as he braced for the next move. He fully expected another wave of water to come crashing toward him.

Instead, Percy leaped over the stream, the water propelling him forward with surprising speed —nearly as fast as Luke himself. Luke's eyes widened in surprise, but his reflexes kicked in just in time.

Percy's sword swung toward him mid-air, and Luke raised his own blade to meet the strike. The clash of metal on metal rang out, reverberating through the clearing as their swords locked.

*Not bad,* Luke thought, a faint smirk tugging at his lips. *But let's see if you can keep up.*

Soon, the clearing filled with the sharp sound of slashing and striking as they moved in a fluid dance around each other. Luke used his speed and longer reach with precision—and yeah, maybe a bit of spite. He wasn't above taking advantage of what he had. Percy was growing, though, already as tall as Luke had been at the tail end of fourteen, and the kid was what—thirteen?

*When he gets older, he's going to be a pain to spar with. And he's basically a waterbender,* Luke thought, letting out a quiet huff through his nose.

Even so, for now, Luke fought with ease. His movements were relaxed, effortless. He dodged Percy's strikes with minimal effort, a tilt of his head or a slight shift of his torso all it took to avoid the blows.

But Percy wasn't stupid—that much was obvious. Luke caught it in the kid's sharp, sea-green eyes, the unblinking focus as they tracked his every move. There was purpose behind what Percy was doing, even if the strikes missed their mark. Luke could see the way Percy was angling the fight, slowly trying to maneuver him away from the flag, to switch their positions.

*Smart,* Luke admitted, deftly deflecting another swing with a flick of his blade. *But clumsy.*

Despite the boy's determination, he didn't have the finesse to pull it off—not yet.

*It's a decent plan*, he thought, tilting his head with a smile that only made Percy's eyes narrow. *But not good enough.*

Deciding to stop playing, Luke advanced quickly, his strikes coming hard and fast, forcing Percy to backtrack, further and further from the flag, and, more importantly, from the stream. The kid was struggling to keep up, his movements faltering under the pressure.

"You've gotten rusty these past months, Percy," Luke commented casually, stepping back just enough to avoid Percy's swing. He shifted to the side, bringing the flat of his sword down against the kid's back and watching with faint amusement as the boy stumbled, nearly losing his balance.

But his amusement faded as Percy straightened up. Then he caught it—a glint in Percy's eyes, something sharp, almost victorious. That was when the hairs on the back of Luke's neck stood on end.

Instinct kicked in, and Luke glanced over his shoulder just in time to see thin streams of water rushing toward him, fast. *From the stream? That's way too far,* Luke thought, surprised. But then he realized Percy had cleverly minimized the strain by reducing the amount of water, turning it into small, bullet-like projectiles.

*Little monster,* Luke thought with grudging approval as he dodged the incoming water bullets, forced to move quickly.

"Or maybe I didn't," Percy shot back, sass dripping from his tone as he closed the gap and swung his sword at Luke again.

Luke barely had time to deflect, his blade meeting Percy's with a sharp clang. The kid was relentless now, coming at him with renewed energy, and the water bullets still zipping toward him weren't helping.

He had to admit—keeping up his rhythm this time was getting trickier.

Huffing lightly, Luke narrowed his eyes and feinted a move, advancing into Percy's space. The boy mirrored him, his own eyes narrowing, his brows furrowing in concentration. That look made Luke pause, instincts flaring.

*Something was coming.*

Trying to backtrack, he braced himself, certain that Percy was summoning another wave of water. But instead, the kid gritted his teeth and pressed forward, managing to thrust his sword toward Luke's midsection even as he strained to control the water. Luke had to block the strike, the clang of their blades reverberating through the clearing.

And then he heard it—the unmistakable rush of water, powerful and fast.

Luke didn't stop to look. Huffing again, he gritted his teeth and forced himself to focus. He needed a solution, *now.*

His mind flashed to Mercury's teachings, those frustrating, cryptic lessons about boundaries. About how Luke's internal world was naturally fortified, easier for him to define and control because it was internal. Mercury had called it a gift, but he'd also told Luke he could project those boundaries outward, shaping the external world with the force of his will.

The trick was making it real—manifesting something intangible like an invisible barrier, a rule born purely of his willpower. Luke had struggled to wrap his head around it, the idea of turning something so abstract into a physical force.

But he could do it. *Barely.*

It wasn't perfect, and he could only manage it close to his body, but that was all he needed right now.

Luke closed his eyes for a split second—*another thing Mercury always nagged him about.* The god had insisted he stop doing that, but Mercury wasn't here to scold him, so Luke did it anyway. Sure, maybe Mercury had a point, but Luke wasn't there yet. This would have to do.

He reached inward, following the steps Mercury had drilled into him. He remembered the god's guidance, that lesson where Mercury had pressed Luke's hand against his chest, insisting he *feel* it—feel how energy flowed, how it could be channeled and controlled.

Oddly intimate. Luke ignored how it had embarrassed him at the time. It was just annoying—*entirely* annoying.

And yet—it worked.

Luke mimicked the process now, clumsy and dragging, like trying to push tar through his veins, but he did it. He shoved the energy outward, shaping it into a barrier as best he could.

*No water crosses this line,* he commanded silently.

Just in time.

The barrier sprang into place as the wave came crashing toward him. Even with the shield up, Luke felt the force of it slam against the invisible wall he'd created. The water didn't pass through, though—it washed around him, his space a dry oasis beneath the wave.

Percy, of course, didn't so much as flinch, standing there unfazed in the torrent like the son of Poseidon he was. But his sea-green eyes widened, the surprise clear on his face as he stared at Luke.

Luke didn't give him a chance to recover.

As the water fell to the ground in a soaking rush, Luke moved. He crouched low, sweeping his leg out as he rolled, catching Percy off guard and knocking him flat onto his stomach.

Before Percy could react, Luke was on him, walking over and planting himself firmly on the boy's back.

The boy let out a sharp breath, the weight forcing the air from his lungs.

"You've got good instincts, kid," Luke said casually, resting his elbow on his knee like this was no big deal. He planted his sword firmly in the ground beside Percy's head, just close enough to make a point—and to keep him from getting any ideas.

"But you've got a ways to go."

Percy groaned, letting his head fall to the ground, much to Luke's amusement. Luke stayed seated, casually keeping an eye on their surroundings now that his own fight was over.

Tyson was still running in circles, a mass of demigods chasing after him. Some blocked his path while others pursued him relentlessly, leaving the poor cyclops visibly confused, as if he couldn't decide who to target. Luke's brats, unsurprisingly, took full advantage of the chaos, ruthlessly pressing their numbers and strategy against him. Tyson, seeming intimidated, ended up retreating, his massive strides almost clumsy under the pressure.

And yeah, a group of cunning demigods could be intimidating—especially with Drew there, using her charmspeak on the poor kid while the rest of the team followed closely behind, cutting off his every escape.

Closer to the flag, a familiar voice cut through the commotion, sharp and unmistakably annoyed. Luke turned his head, and when he caught sight of the scene, he couldn't stop the snort of amusement that escaped him.

Inês had one hand clamped firmly on Annabeth's shoulder, keeping her rooted in place, while her other hand waved with exaggerated drama over the younger girl's face. Luke didn't need to get closer to know what was happening. Makeup was materializing on Annie's face—bold, dramatic, and absolutely *Annabeth-disapproved.*

Annabeth scowled fiercely, but the telltale redness creeping up her cheeks betrayed her embarrassment. Luke recognized that shade of red well enough by now.

Ever the clown, Inês tutted in mock disapproval before gesturing again. The makeup shifted with a wave of her hand, morphing into a completely new look. Then another. And another. Annabeth squirmed under her grip, but it was useless. Inês wasn't letting her go until she was satisfied.

Finally, with a triumphant grin, she snapped her fingers to finalize her masterpiece.

Luke tilted his head. Objectively, Annabeth did look cute. But he knew her well enough to guess she'd rather sprint through a gauntlet blindfolded than endure this. Frills and glam weren't her style, and the fact that this makeover came courtesy of the Aphrodite cabin?

She was definitely mortified—not just by the makeup, but by the loss itself, especially to a group she probably considered an easy challenge.

*Alas,* Luke mused with a small shrug as Annabeth glared daggers at Inês, her pout doing little to mask her embarrassment. *It's a lesson she needed to learn.* With an inward sigh, he pulled his sword from where it was stuck in the ground beside Percy's head. *Still, I'll do her a favor and save her this time.*

He stood, stepping over Percy as he moved away, earning a relieved sigh from the boy. *Silly kid,* Luke thought, deciding to let it slide. Running a hand through his damp hair, he headed toward Inês and Annabeth.

Despite all his dodging, the water had still managed to get to him—his hair, clothes, and skin were soaked. His shirt clung to him in all the worst ways, irritating him with every step.

He felt like a drenched cat—and just as annoyed.

*Fighting a spawn of Poseidon,* he mused with a huff, *always a treat.*

As he approached, Inês turned to him, her sharp eyes glinting with mischief. She paused, giving him a slow, deliberate once-over, her lips curling into a sly smirk.

*Here comes shit.*

Inês straightened, finally letting go of Annabeth, who immediately darted behind Luke. Of course, she'd never admit to hiding—it was a tactical retreat, no doubt.

Placing a hand dramatically over her chest, Inês raised a finger as though she were about to deliver the most profound declaration of her life.

"I'm pretty sure the history books say this," she began, her voice ringing with mock gravitas. Luke raised a brow, crossing his arms, bracing himself for whatever nonsense was coming.

"That the fall of the Roman Empire," she continued, closing her eyes for dramatic effect and gesturing toward his drenched form, "was caused by *that* waist."

Luke blinked, uncomprehending.

"There's no soldier alive," she added, her tone still grand and solemn, "who can stand strong when faced with that."

The clearing fell silent. Even Annabeth paused her furious scrubbing to glare up at Inês, her expression one of profound judgment. Percy, who had wandered over after dusting himself off, turned to Luke with furrowed brows. His sea-green eyes flicked briefly to Luke's midsection, then darted away just as quickly.

Luke stood there for a moment, staring blankly as his brain struggled to catch up. Then, without hesitation, he walked over to Inês.

"No, ma'am, I gotta shake your hand for this," he said, clasping Inês's hand firmly before giving her shoulder a pat.

“That was leagues better than your usual ones. You’ve really outdone yourself, *artilheira*[3]. You deserve a trophy for this one.”

*Much better,* he thought, amusement curling through him despite himself—especially considering there were kids around. The memory of her last jab surfaced in his mind, and he had to stifle a laugh. Thankfully, that one had been delivered in Portuguese, making it a thousand times funnier with her hissing accent.

Most people hadn’t understood a word she’d said, but Annabeth had caught some of it. Thankfully, not *those* words.

*Eita, loirinho do rabo grande, quero saber quando vens lá a casa*[4]

Luke felt a faint heat crawl up his neck at the memory, but he shook it off quickly.

“You think so?” Inês clasped her hands together, her eyes gleaming with excitement. Then she straightened up, her expression shifting into one of smug satisfaction, like she was mentally giving herself a round of applause. “I’ll test it on one of my crushes.”

“One of,” Luke repeated flatly, his tone mocking. He didn’t bother listening to her defense, her voice fading into the background as he scanned the clearing.

Annabeth was still scrubbing furiously at her face, scowling all the while. Beside her, Percy stood frozen, staring as if he’d never seen her before. Luke narrowed his eyes. Was that a spark of a crush? He filed it away for later.

His attention shifted again, landing on the group that had been chasing Tyson. The cyclops now sat on the ground, looking like a kicked puppy surrounded by a pack of overzealous demigods. They were circling him like tiny judges, their faces stern as if they were scolding him. Tyson, for his part, seemed utterly confused, his single eye drooping with guilt. Luke let out a quiet huff of irritation.

Bullying? Not on his watch.

He was about to step forward to deal with it when a scream tore through the air, followed by the blaring of the horn signaling the end of the game. Luke froze, confused for a split second.

The clearing went dead silent as everyone tensed. Beside him, Inês cut herself off mid-ramble and instinctively moved to stand beside him, their shoulders nearly brushing. The stillness was broken by the unmistakable sound—shrieks, sharp and metallic, like rusted knives scraping against stone. Heavy, frantic flapping followed, the air alive with the furious beating of too many wings.

Luke’s stomach dropped. He snapped his head toward Inês, whose wide eyes reflected the same grim realization. They spoke in unison.

“Stymphalian birds.”

Then came the chaos. Demigods poured into the clearing in desperation, the sky growing darker with the sheer number of cursed pests circling above.

Luke's gaze quickly swept the crowd. His stomach clenched when he spotted Clarisse. Her arm was bleeding heavily from a deep cut, but her face betrayed no pain as she ran, keeping to the rear to guard her siblings. Around her, other demigods—opponents from the game—were all hurt and panicked. Blood was everywhere, some cuts superficial, others far more serious.

And then Luke saw the Stolls.

His heart leapt to his throat.

Travis looked terrified, his face pale as he dragged Connor on his back, struggling under the weight of his brother and his own injuries. Luke cataloged it instantly—Travis's cuts were shallow, marking his face and arms, but they weren't the problem.

Connor was.

Connor's face was deathly pale, his breathing labored, and Luke's sharp eyes caught the deep red staining his side. Too much red. Too dark.

The sight froze Luke's blood. Panic gripped him, cold and suffocating, as something dark and feral stirred deep within him.

He clenched his jaw, forcing himself to stay composed, and barked out, "Cabin Eleven, on position! Gather bows, anything you can throw, and hide in the trees!" His sharp eyes flicked upward, narrowing at the circling mass above. "These pests won't move as fast with the branches in their way. Use the cover!"

Beside him, Inês's voice sliced through the chaos, sharp and commanding. "Cabin Ten! Follow Cabin Eleven's lead! Offer support where needed!" She whirled toward someone in the fray, barking, "Drew! Use your charmspeak as much as you can and stay close to the others—don't get hurt!"

Then, without hesitation, both of them surged forward into the chaos.

The scene ahead was pure havoc—wounded campers stumbling in every direction, sharp-winged birds swooping down like razors, and screams piercing the air. Blood slicked the ground, mingling with the golden shimmer of dust from fallen monsters. Luke only had eyes for one thing.

*His brothers.*

Luke's eyes narrowed, every muscle in his body coiling with focus as he pushed through the chaos. He dodged injured campers and diving birds, weaving through the fray with single-minded purpose. His brothers were moving, but not fast enough—not nearly fast enough.

Then he saw it: a bird circling high above, its metallic wings glinting ominously in the dim light as it dipped sharply to the side. Its descent was fast, precise, and aimed directly at them.

Luke surged forward, pushing himself harder, faster, ignoring everything else. The world blurred around him—screams, the twang of bows, the clash of weapons, the rush of water, and the shrill metallic cries of the birds. Golden dust mixed with blood beneath his feet, but none of it mattered. All that mattered was the threat to his brothers.

Time seemed to stretch, every detail sharpening. The bird dove lower, its talons outstretched, and something inside Luke snapped.

*No threat passes this line around my brothers.* The thought was sharp, instinctive. Energy surged outward. It locked into place just as Luke stumbled, a wave of fatigue threatening to drag him down. He forced himself to keep moving, pushing past the sudden heaviness in his limbs.

He couldn't stop—not now.

The bird was almost there. Travis looked up, fear flashing across his face, and for a moment, Luke thought he was too late. Travis's eyes squeezed shut, bracing for the inevitable.

But it didn't come.

The bird collided with something, an unseen barrier, the impact reverberating like clashing metal. It flapped its wings wildly, disoriented and struggling to push through, but it couldn't. It wouldn't.

Luke closed the distance in a heartbeat, his blade slicing cleanly through the creature. The bird split in two, suspended midair for a fraction of a second, gore spilling before it disintegrated into golden dust.

He stood over the fading remnants, chest heaving, limbs trembling under a weight that felt almost unbearable. Heavy—so heavy—but the adrenaline kept him upright for now, even as his Luke's grip tightened on the sword in his hand.

The crash would come later.

But it didn't matter. Not now.

Luke's gaze snapped to his brothers, scanning them, cataloging every detail. Connor's side was red—so red that Luke could barely see the fabric of his shirt beneath the blood. For a split second, Levi's voice echoed in his ears, haunting. He blinked hard, clenching his teeth as he closed the distance between them.

Travis's eyes were teary, his face a mix of exhaustion and relief as he looked at Luke like he was a lifeline.

"Give him to me. I'll hold him," Luke commanded, already reaching for Connor. He adjusted his grip carefully, mindful of the boy's injuries, making sure he didn't cause more pain.

Travis didn't argue, didn't even speak—just stayed close, his wide eyes darting around like he was waiting for the world to fall apart again.

Luke glanced down at Connor's pale face, watching his chest rise and fall with shaky breaths. It hit him like a blade to the gut, carving out old fears and igniting a burning urgency in his chest. One thought screamed louder than the chaos around him: *Get him to a healer. Now.*

He couldn't lose anyone else.

Lifting his head, Luke forced himself to take in the battlefield. Water pooled everywhere, mingling with blood and golden dust. Hurt campers staggered or sat in clusters, their injuries tended to by others. The Stymphalian birds, once a suffocating swarm, were now reduced to stragglers. Dust coated the ground, clinging to trees and leaves, shimmering gold in the fading sunlight. It would've been beautiful if it weren't a grim reminder of death and the monsters they'd fought.

Above, a handful of birds lingered, their shrieks fading as they scattered, retreating toward the horizon. Luke clenched his jaw, crushing the dark, gnawing urge to chase after them and finish what they'd started. Their flock was shattered, beaten, and fleeing.

The campers had won.

But the cost...

He adjusted his grip on Connor, his arms straining but steady as he pivoted toward the cluster of blonde heads from Cabin Seven. One stood out, golden hair gleaming in the sun. Luke locked eyes on Lee. Behind him, Travis stayed close—so close that the boy's trembling hand clutched the hem of Luke's shirt like a lifeline.

Luke didn't tell him to let go.

"Lee," he called, his voice even but distant, his face stoic.

Lee, who had been tending to a Cabin Five camper with a shallow cut on their arm, froze mid-motion. His gaze snapped to Connor, and his expression immediately shifted to something sharper, more serious. Without hesitation, he barked orders to one of his siblings, handing over his current task and stepping away.

He rushed toward Luke, his eyes scanning Connor with urgency.

"Set him down here," Lee instructed, gesturing firmly to a nearby patch of flat ground cleared for healing.

But Luke didn't move. He stayed rooted, Connor's weight still cradled in his arms, and Travis pressed close to his side, both hands clutching Luke's shirt like it was the only thing tethering him to the moment.

Lee paused, taking in the scene. His eyes flicked between Luke, Connor, and Travis.

Reading the situation, he chose not to push. Instead, his brows furrowed deeply as he focused on Connor's side. His expression darkened at the sight of the wound, but he said nothing. Raising his hands, Lee closed his eyes, and golden light began to bloom between his fingers as he murmured a soft, steady chant.

Luke watched.

He watched the faint color returning to Connor's pale face, the boy's breaths growing slower, steadier. He watched the bleeding on his side ease, then stop entirely. Only when the light faded did Luke glance down, catching sight of his own arms and hands, smeared with Connor's blood.

His chest felt cold, his limbs weightless, like he was floating somewhere distant from his own body. But he couldn't—wouldn't—let go.

Not yet.

Luke glanced up at the sky, now empty of threats, then toward the horizon, where the borders of Camp lay quiet in the distance. But his mind was anything but quiet.

He felt Travis press closer into his side, his trembling hands clutching Luke's shirt like it was the only thing that could steady him. Connor's weak grip tugged at the fabric too, his glassy blue eyes fluttering open, barely focused but locking on Luke's face.

Luke tightened his hold.

His brother was alive.

Relief hit him hard, a rush that left him unsteady. But exhaustion followed close behind, heavy and threatening to pull him down. He couldn't give in, though—not yet. Connor needed him. Then, just a beat later, the fury crept in, dark and silent.

Luke's gaze burned as it flicked back to the sky. Then he looked down at his arms, at his hands—smeared with blood. Connor's blood. His little brother's blood.

The sight made something snap.

The barriers wouldn't hold. Not like this. Not for long.

A quest was needed. The Golden Fleece was needed.

And may the Lord hear him now.

He'd get it. One way or another.

Chapter End Notes

1 - Seu Lunga – The man was real. He was known for being the rudest guy ever, and his name became a way to describe someone who is being very rude, lol.

2 - Velho do Restelo – This is a Portuguese saying (if it isn't, feel free to correct me). It refers to someone pessimistic, skeptical, or overly cautious. It comes from Os Lusíadas,

where the “Old Man of Restelo” criticizes the explorers before they set sail.

3 - Artilheira – Top scorer / goal scorer

4 - Eita, loirinho do rabo grande, quero saber quando vens lá a casa - Damn, big-butted blondie, I wanna know when you’re coming over to my place

So… peace, then chaos, with a bonding moment in the middle, lol. More boundary discussions, with a hint of Mercury and Luke’s relationship progressing(?). Luke is still trying so hard to make himself oblivious to his own feelings… and then the cool moment against Percy!

And… yeah, the Stymphalian birds. A bloodbath. Luke is this close to losing it, and now the need to do something is more apparent than ever.

In any case, thanks for reading! I appreciate all comments and kudos, and I love hearing your thoughts—no matter if you’re late to the party!

So, do you guys think Luke will go on the quest?

# Chapter 52: SoM - Demigod Assembly

Chapter Summary

A meeting is called.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Luke leaned back in the creaky old chair, arms crossed over his chest, his weight settling against the wooden frame with a faint groan of protest. He was in the meeting room of the Big House—or rather, what passed for a meeting room. In reality, it was just a recreation room, complete with a chessboard set up on a table in one corner, Mr. D's obligatory pinochle game on another, and shelves crammed full of random items. Shelves held everything from candy and books to dusty trophies and spoils of war that should've been in the attic but somehow ended up here.

And of course, the group was gathered behind a ping-pong table.

Luke huffed, his annoyance plain to see.

How ridiculous.

The absurdity of holding serious discussions in a room like this grated on him. It made the weight of the situation feel lighter than it should, and he couldn't help but wonder why no one had thought to create an actual meeting room for these things. A space that wasn't cluttered with games and mismatched furniture.

The thought lingered in Luke's mind as he scanned the room, but the creak of his chair and the low murmur of conversations around him snapped him back.

All the head counselors were gathered here for an emergency meeting, along with both directors, Mr. D and Pentheus. Luke's gaze swept across the room, taking in the familiar faces. Annabeth sat nearby, her expression serious as she whispered something to Percy. Luke figured she was probably explaining things to him, given that Percy was a head counselor only by technicality—being the sole demigod son of Poseidon. Dionysus' twin sons were present too, sharing the counselor role as co-counselors, not that it mattered much since their cabin consisted solely of them.

Clarisse was there, her face set in a severe expression. The cuts on her arms and face remained unhealed—she'd refused treatment earlier so the healers could focus on more critical injuries, and even now, she hadn't let them tend to her wounds. Further down, Charles Beckendorf sat fidgeting with something in his hands. Luke noted the gesture absently; it was a tell. The kid was affected—understandably so.

The mood in the room was heavy, a mix of tension and somberness. The air felt thick, and Luke could see it in the way some of the younger campers kept glancing over their shoulders—or up, even though they were surrounded by four walls. He understood it well enough; only a day had passed since the disaster, and the aftermath still hung over them like a dark, suffocating cloud.

*A flash—Connor's pale face, blood smeared everywhere, the frantic wave of demigods gathered around, fire burning high, its glow stretching almost until dawn.*

Luke blinked hard, trying to push the memory back, but it lingered like a shadow at the edge of his mind. He caught a few of the kids throwing wary glances in his direction. Their unease was obvious, and he didn't need to ask to know why. His mood hung around him like a storm cloud, suffocating and volatile. He didn't care enough to soften it. Couldn't, even if he tried.

Inês and Lee weren't much better off. Their concern was clear in the way they glanced at him, though their expressions were as grave as Luke's own. They were used to seeing him like this—a *gift* from last year, born of too many disasters, too many problems.

Still, they didn't press him.

They didn't need to.

They understood.

Luke leaned back in his chair, his arms crossing even tighter over his chest. His fingers dug into his biceps hard enough to leave marks he'd see later, but that didn't matter. None of it did.

His face remained blank, his expression unreadable, a mask that gave away nothing.

But he was not fine.

"Now, since we're all here, you can start with the report—details," Mr. D said, seated beside Luke. His tone was lazy, almost dismissive, but Luke could hear the hint of command beneath it. It was an order, despite the nonchalance.

Everyone else must have heard it too because the room shifted, everyone straightening, attention snapping to the front.

Clarisse stood without hesitation, her posture rigid, back straight, face shadowed. Those rust-blood eyes of hers were narrowed, heavy with something grim.

"Cabin Five was on patrol," she began, her voice steady, though Luke didn't miss the tension radiating off her. Her jaw was tight, her shoulders squared, and her hands hung clenched at her sides. "We'd killed some monsters—the usual amount, nothing we couldn't handle—and we were patrolling the limits of the barrier. None of us went beyond it; we didn't want to risk anything catching our scent and trying their luck again. We were regrouping, keeping our strength up, waiting for our relief."

Her teeth clenched as she spoke, her eyebrows furrowing deeper, darkening her gaze. Beneath the anger, Luke could see it—guilt and sorrow, faint but there, emotions she worked hard to bury under her soldier's posture.

"Then we heard it," she continued. "The sound of metal—grinding, clashing. We moved immediately, took position. At first, we thought it was another automaton, but… it wasn't."

Clarisse stopped, fists curling tighter, her nails biting into her palms. The silence stretched, heavy, before she forced herself to go on.

"It was birds. A huge group of them. They filled the sky—so many it darkened. Their shrieks were everywhere, and they threw themselves against the barrier. At first, it held, and we took advantage. Hit-and-run tactics. When they dived, one of ours would dart out, take a few down, and retreat. We managed to kill a good number like that."

Her voice wavered, just slightly. She swallowed hard, her throat bobbing visibly.

"But then… then the barrier didn't hold." Her eyes flickered, shadows crossing her face. "The birds dived, and instead of bouncing off the barrier like they should've, they started to cross. Slowly at first, like they were pushing through something thick, but… they made it. And once the first ones broke through, the rest followed. They swarmed us, circling, diving, attacking. We fought back, killed as many as we could, but there were too many. We were getting overwhelmed."

"Too many were getting hurt. We couldn't keep up. I gave the order to retreat, to head for the forest. I thought the trees might give us cover, help us regroup with the other cabins, maybe join forces. But mostly…" Clarisse hesitated, her voice dropping to a near-whisper. "It was just to survive."

Her shoulders tensed, her knuckles going white. "All the while, those birds chased us. They didn't stop." She closed her eyes for a brief moment, her jaw tightening, and when she opened them again, there was no attempt to mask the grief in her gaze. "We found the others—some of them—and joined up. We kept running, kept warning anyone we passed. We fought back where we could. The trees helped a little, but…" Her voice caught, and she swallowed hard. "Some got really hurt. Others fell."

Clarisse took a steadying breath, straightening, her face shifting back to that unreadable severity she wore like armor. "Eventually, we reached a clearing. Almost everyone was there. And we fought. Together, we managed to push them back, killed most of them."

"But there are still some out there," Annabeth added, stepping in to finish, her voice grim and even. The faint cut on her face was stark against her skin, a fresh mark not yet faded to match her complexion. "We don't know if they'll recover their numbers—or if they'll try to come back."

"And that's not all," Lee spoke up from his seat beside Inês. His usually tanned face was pale—sicklier than Luke had ever seen—and the dark shadows under his eyes were stark, like bruises.

He hadn't slept last night; Luke knew because neither of them had. Both had kept vigil in the infirmary, watching the fires burn from the windows as the chaos unfolded.

"The number of injured is high," Lee continued, his voice steady but heavy with exhaustion. "Almost all campers are hurt in some way or another. Cabin Seven had to start rationing ambrosia and nectar to prioritize the worst cases, but even with that, we're running dangerously low. The infirmary is constantly overrun, and me, my siblings, even volunteers from other cabins—we're not managing to keep up."

He paused, his amber eyes dimming as his hands clenched together tightly, knuckles turning white. It was like he was trying to gather his thoughts, searching for the right words.

Finally, his voice dropped lower, grim. "We're running out of able-bodied demigods."

The room fell silent.

But Luke's thoughts churned wildly. He leaned back in his chair, tilting his head to stare at the ceiling, and let the memories take over.

The *aftermath*.

One moment, it was Capture the Flag—competitive, noisy, and familiar. The next, everything had broken apart. Blood. Screams. Carnage. The sharp metallic shrieks of those cursed birds cutting through it all.

And then the funerals.

He narrowed his eyes, his jaw clenching as the images forced their way back. The bodies—small, too still, some missing pieces.

*Stymphalian birds were human eaters.*

That thought had come to him numbly at the time, distant and dull, but it echoed now.

Children crying. Screams tearing through the air. Grief hung heavy over them all, suffocating, like a giant made of their collective sorrow, pressing a finger down—slow, cruel—and crushing them beneath it.

Luke had stood in the middle of it, trying to hold himself together, his chest tight with a pain he couldn't afford to let show. He'd been numb, yet everything still hurt. He'd watched as the bodies were gathered, lifeless forms carried away, the loss etched into every face around him.

The little ones from his cabin haunted him most.

Henry—shy but brilliant—always with his nose in a book about space, dreaming of being an astronaut. And Olivia, sweet, gentle Olivia, who always shared her cookies at lunch.

Both gone.

Stolen too soon.

They had not been whole.

*Good Lord, they had not been whole.*

Luke closed his eyes, pain twisting through him.

They hadn't even had the chance to know their godly parents.

Forgotten.

*No.*

His fingers curled tightly into his arms, his nails biting into his skin. Not forgotten. He remembered them.

He'd *always* remember them.

He thought of the gathering in the cabins' common area, the air heavy with sorrow. The bodies laid out, children lost too soon. He thought of Hestia, small and solemn in her child form, standing silently beside him. Her hand had rested lightly on his arm, warm as she gazed at the scene with eyes so full of sadness it made his throat ache. She hadn't said anything, hadn't needed to.

When he'd eventually walked away—overwhelmed by rage, grief, and a numbing weight he couldn't carry—she'd only watched him go, her kind eyes free of judgment.

He left, but the night didn't end.

It stretched on as he sat on vigil, watching Connor breathe. His little brother looked so small, so pale. Each rise and fall of his chest felt fragile, precious, like it could stop at any moment if Luke didn't keep watching.

*He's just sleeping,* he had told himself, again and again, like a mantra.

But the stillness haunted him.

The way Connor looked so lifeless, so eerily still, made his chest tighten. Yet every shallow breath proved otherwise—his chest rising and falling, faint but steady.

Lee had been there as well, moving quietly around the infirmary. He never stopped, tending to one camper after another with mechanical precision.

Luke remembered the way Lee's eyes kept drifting toward the fires outside, just for a moment, before snapping back to his work.

Luke understood.

Lee had lost siblings too.

But there was no time to honor them, no chance to grieve—not when Camp needed him. Not when others were clinging to life and depending on Lee to keep them alive.

Clenching his jaw, Luke lowered his head, breaking his gaze from the ceiling as a voice cut through the tense quiet.

His eyes focused on Mr. D, who sat at the head of the table, his elbows resting on the surface as he leaned forward. Pentheus stood beside him, stoic as always, though there was something softer in his expression—a faint glimmer of empathy, or perhaps pity, as his gaze swept over the gathered head counselors.

Mr. D looked troubled. The heaviness around him was palpable if you knew how to see it: the subtle tension at the corners of his eyes, the way his normally disinterested demeanor seemed weighed down by something more serious.

Luke narrowed his eyes, his focus sharpening as he listened.

“I will call for an emergency meeting with the Olympians as soon as possible,” Mr. D announced. His fingers laced together under his chin as his gaze swept across the room, meeting the eyes of every counselor.

“I will… request assistance from the other gods. More guards are needed if we are to hold the line—perhaps even Argus, though not in an official capacity. We can no longer manage with the resources we have. The barriers are weakening, and the threats are growing.”

The weight of Mr. D’s words settled over the room, sinking into every corner until the silence was so thick a pin drop would echo.

Luke sat straighter, his jaw tightening as he absorbed the implications. His eyes flicked over the others, scanning their faces. Some looked speechless. Others lost. A few dared to look hopeful.

*Children,* Luke thought bitterly, anger flaring hot in his chest.

Weeks.

The barriers had been weak for so long, and the demigods—literal kids—had been forced to shoulder the weight of defending Camp. They’d been pushed to their limits, wrung dry trying to guard themselves against the endless threats from the outside.

And where were the gods?

Promises.

They’d only ever made promises.

*We’re looking into it,* they’d said.

Empty, meaningless words while the dangers multiplied, while the demigods fought and bled. And worse still, they hadn’t just failed to help—they’d actively made everything harder.

Kicking out Chiron, the one with millennia of experience and wisdom, and Argus, who could've bolstered their defenses, wasn't just negligence—it was outright stupidity.

And now, suddenly, this talk of assistance?

*A little too late,* Luke thought, his lips curling into a faint sneer.

Connor's shaky breaths flickered in his memory, unbidden, and Luke's hand curled into a fist against the table. He forced the image away, but his blood boiled, the anger surging hotter.

And Hermes.

His father. His patron. Silent for months. No help. And worse, he'd voted to remove Chiron.

Where was Hermes when Luke needed him?

Where was the god who was supposed to guide him, protect him?

He clenched his teeth, grinding them as his fists tightened. He'd stopped praying to Hermes. Stopped offering.

*What was the point?*

The man had proven over and over again that Luke couldn't count on him.

Hestia, though. And Mr. D. They'd been there.

If Hermes wouldn't help him, Luke wouldn't waste another second pretending he cared.

He was tired of being a fool.

The card in his pocket burned, and before he could stop himself, Luke's voice cut through the heavy silence.

"And what of us?" The words came sharper than he intended, brittle with bitterness. "What exactly are we supposed to do to survive until"—he sneered, the anger in his eyes barely restrained, his tone dripping with irony—"the gods see fit to provide us with something? Anything at all, so we don't end up trampled under a stampede of monsters?"

He smiled then, sharp and cold, a hollow thing that didn't even try to reach his eyes.

"Time does move differently for them, after all. Weeks for us, and for them… just a blink. If that."

The reaction was immediate.

Everyone stiffened, the uneasy tension in the room tightening like a noose.

Inês, seated beside him, shot him a wide-eyed look, her hand darting under the table to grab his knee. Her fingers dug in, like she thought she could anchor him, hold him back, as if the

motion alone could shove the words back into his throat before they caused any more damage.

Luke didn't particularly care. His focus was locked on his uncle.

Mr. D blinked slowly, deliberately, like one of those big cats sizing up prey. Then, with unnatural calm, he turned to face Luke fully. His expression was utterly neutral, blank in a way that made it impossible to gauge what lay beneath.

He studied Luke with an unflinching gaze.

Inês's grip tightened, her nails biting into his skin, but Luke didn't look away. He didn't flinch.

Finally, Mr. D spoke, his voice measured, calm, and annoyingly controlled. But his eyes—they were sharp like blades, intent.

"The meeting will be soon, Luke. I will call it immediately. And the gods will act as quickly as they can. I will make sure the urgency of our situation is properly conveyed to ensure their assistance comes as soon as possible."

Luke's lips twitched, threatening to curl into a bitter smile.

*Soon.*

What a hollow, weightless word.

To a god, *soon* could mean anything—a day, a year, a mortal's entire lifetime. What was *soon* to beings who didn't measure time the same way?

The thought curdled inside him, and he felt a laugh rise in his throat, but it caught, twisting into something colder. Closer to disdain.

"I see, Mr. D. I understand it all, but…" Luke kept his voice measured, controlled.

He lifted his gaze through lowered lashes, tilting his head just enough to appear disarming—just enough to make himself look sweet. He had long learned how to be seen that way.

The privileges of being pretty. And he knew exactly how to use them.

"Don't you agree that in times like these, when we're the ones most affected, it's on *us* to take the initiative? To find our own solutions?" His tone was thoughtful, persuasive, edged with just the right amount of reasoning. "And wouldn't having *multiple* plans in place be the wisest way to ensure our safety?"

He let the question linger, his smile sweet—the kind that was as pretty as nightshade, and just as rotten.

"A quest," Luke said, his tone light but pointed. "The Golden Fleece. The circumstances demand it. I propose we send someone to speak with the Oracle."

The room seemed to exhale as one, only to be swallowed by rippling whispers.

*The Golden Fleece.*

The words passed from one camper to another, hushed but growing louder.

*It was said to heal anything, to restore what was broken. Maybe it could repair the barriers. Maybe it could save them.*

The murmurs thickened, filling the air with uncertainty and a fragile thread of hope.

Luke felt their eyes on him, their gazes heavy. He didn't have to look to know their thoughts were scrambling, spinning, trying to grasp what the hell he'd just proposed.

*Him*, of all people.

Beside him, Inês loosened her grip on his knee. He felt her gaze now, searching, her brows furrowed in a way that begged for an explanation.

But he didn't look at her.

His attention remained fixed on Mr. D, whose expression had darkened. Luke caught the brief flash of purple in his uncle's eyes—ominous, warning—but he didn't waver.

Wasn't it Mr. D who had told him to search for his own answers? To take action?

This was the answer Luke had found, the solution he was choosing—and he wasn't going to back down from it.

"No."

Mr. D's voice cut through the murmuring like the blade of an executioner, his eyes now glowing an unnerving shade of purple.

For a moment, Luke froze, like he hadn't quite understood. But then the word sank in and his face twisted into a scowl. Anger flared hot in his chest, rising too fast to stop, and before he knew it, he was standing, towering over Mr. D's chair.

Inês rushed up beside him, her hand gripping the back of his shirt, tugging hard to pull him back, but he barely noticed.

"We need it, Uncle!" Luke's voice was heated, all sweet pretense stripped away, burned up by frustration. "You can hate heroes all you want, but this isn't about that! This is life or death! What happens when another horde of monsters shows up, drawn by the scent of hundreds of demigods crammed into one place? Like those years ago—when the King's daughter came."

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Annabeth flinch at the mention, but he pressed on, his gaze locked on Mr. D. "You remember it as well as I do. We'd be *massacred*!"

His breath came fast, his chest heaving as the room seemed to hold its collective breath. The hand on his back—Inês's desperate attempt to pull him back—froze, her grip uncertain now. The other demigods sat pale and unmoving, their wide-eyed gazes flickering between him and Dionysus.

Regret pricked at the edges of Luke's thoughts, a small voice reminding him he'd gone too far. But it was smothered, buried under years of anger, frustration, and repressed bitterness.

He didn't care. Not enough to stop.

His focus was fixed on Mr. D, who sat still, his expression a mask made of marble. Indifferent. Legs crossed, hands resting lightly on his knee, he looked as though none of this mattered.

But Luke saw the purple shade in his uncle's eyes, the tightness in his mouth. The subtle tells were all there.

Mr. D was angry.

So was Luke.

"Sit down, Luke Castellan," Mr. D commanded, his tone soft but razor-sharp.

Luke scowled, narrowing his eyes in open challenge.

His uncle didn't so much as blink.

"Or I'll turn you into a little songbird and send you off to sing your complaints to your father. Let *him* deal with your tantrum."

The words were calm, almost offhand, but the threat behind them was crystal clear.

For a moment, Luke stood his ground, still defiant. But then, seeing the serious set of Dionysus' face, he grudgingly dropped into his chair with a heavy thud, arms crossed tightly over his chest as he glared at the table.

Singing to his father. He scoffed internally. *As if.*

He sat because he wanted to, not because he believed his uncle would actually follow through with the threat.

…Maybe.

He could feel the eyes on him, the campers' stares burning into his skin. He ignored them—or tried to—as Inês jabbed him hard in the side.

Luke didn't look at her. He didn't need to. He knew exactly what she thought. And right now, he didn't care.

The silence that followed grew thick and uncomfortable. No one moved. No one dared to speak. Luke stayed rigid, his eyes fixed on the table, his jaw tight. Beside him, Mr. D sipped from his summoned Diet Coke, the action casual in appearance but stiff in execution.

Finally, Pentheus, who had remained silent through the entire meeting, cleared his throat and spoke.

“Excuse me,” he began, his tone careful, “but I cannot say I disagree with young Luke, Lord Dionysus. As has been tradition for eons, such times of strife have often called for consultation with the Oracle. Not only heroes, but even ordinary people have sought its guidance in dire moments.”

Mr. D’s response was immediate, mocking, and dripping with irony.

“Of course *you* would agree with this,” he shot back, his glowing purple eyes flicking to Pentheus like a predator sizing up its prey.

Luke saw it—the way Pentheus’ stoic mask cracked for a fraction of a second, how his composure faltered. Sweat pooling on his brow, his lips tightening as Mr. D’s gaze bore down on him.

*Fear*.

That was fear.

“It seems,” Mr. D continued, his voice deceptively calm but laced with venom, “you’ve conveniently forgotten your own circumstances.”

“Mr. D,” a voice cut through the tension like a knife.

Luke turned to look, and there she was—Clarisse, standing tall, her shoulders squared and her jaw set with stubborn resolve. Her eyes shone with a fire that could ignite a room. “I will consult the Oracle. I will retrieve the Golden Fleece.”

Her declaration was like a spark thrown into dry kindling.

The room erupted almost instantly.

Voices rose, overlapping and clashing as everyone started talking at once. Arguments ignited as some shouted that Clarisse couldn’t just decide such a thing on her own, while others claimed someone else should take the quest.

The chaos spiraled further, accusations flying—one camper accusing another of wanting the quest for glory, another shouting that the entire idea was reckless, a desperate gamble that could doom them all.

The noise grew louder, messier, each voice trying to overpower the next.

Luke remained seated, silent in the middle of the chaos. He leaned back slightly, his eyes making a quick, detached sweep of the room. He didn’t bother engaging. His focus fixed on

Mr. D.

With each passing second, the god's face darkened, his expression hardening like stone, his patience thinning visibly.

Then, all at once, it happened.

A surge of power swept through the room, pressing against Luke's skin like an electric charge, prickling and sharp. His hair stood on end, but he didn't flinch. Around him, however, the campers froze, their arguments cut off mid-sentence as the weight of Mr. D's aura pressed down on them.

"You all sit down," his uncle ordered, his voice dangerously low. His purple-glowing eyes swept over the room, and even the boldest campers shrank under his gaze. "Your voices prickle on my nerves."

And just like that, it was done. Everyone obeyed without hesitation.

Massaging his temples, Mr. D swept his gaze over the room. His eyes lingered on Luke, who met the look with a raised brow. The response earned a huff and an eye roll from the god before his attention shifted to Clarisse.

She stiffened under the weight of his gaze, her posture snapping taut like a bowstring.

Mr. D pointed his Diet Coke at her.

"You, Carlyse," he began with a lazy wave of his hand. "Since you so graciously volunteered yourself, go on." When she didn't immediately move, he raised an eyebrow, voice sharpening just slightly. "Go, before I change my mind."

That got her moving.

Clarisse bolted from the room, almost tripping over her own feet in her haste to leave. The door slammed shut behind her, and Mr. D clasped his hands together, the noise deafening in the quiet.

"Well, brats," he declared, his tone slipping back into its usual nonchalance. "As your"—he glanced at Luke, a quick look that practically screamed *we'll talk later, troublesome brat* —"oldest camper so wisely suggested with his *many plans* spiel, I'll humor you. Try your luck on this little quest. Let's see if one of you can actually save the day."

He sipped his drink, the motion signaling that he was finished talking, the matter closed—at least on his end.

The room remained tense, the whispers starting up again, hesitant but carrying an edge of hope.

Luke caught a few glances between Annabeth and Percy. It didn't take much to guess they were scheming something, and Percy's face said it all—he wasn't happy that Clarisse had been the one chosen for the quest.

Though *chosen* was too strong a word to describe what had just happened. *Settled on* seemed more accurate.

Luke let out a small sigh, weariness settling over him like a sack of rocks. Something in his chest felt looser now, though a new worry replaced it. Still, it was less urgent than the suffocating tension that had hung over him before.

For the first time in what felt like forever, there was a direction. A plan. A tangible solution.

The Golden Fleece. It was their *only* option.

And Luke was going to make sure it happened. Because there was no way he wasn't going on that quest.

"Are you satisfied, brat?" Mr. D's voice broke the relative quiet, though his gaze remained on his drink as he swirled it in tight, precise circles. His tone was light, but something beneath it was heavier, *pointed.*

Then his uncle lifted his eyes, locking them on Luke.

There was no humor there, only a seriousness that felt like it could slice through stone.

"You have a quest now. Let's just hope things don't end the way they did all those years ago."

Luke held his gaze for a second, his jaw tightening. Then he pressed his lips into a thin line and turned away.

*A low blow, Uncle D,* he thought bitterly, Levi's face flashing in his mind, followed by the dragon, the nymphs—the memories hitting like unwelcome guests. *A low blow.*

"Luke!" Inês hissed.

Luke barely tilted his head toward her, catching sight of Lee standing beside her, his expression nearly identical to hers, though better masked.

"Are you out of your mind?" she demanded, fingers jabbing into his side with enough force to make him flinch. Her voice stayed low, cautious, as her eyes darted toward Mr. D to make sure he wasn't paying attention. "What were you thinking, challenging Mr. D like that? And a quest? Seriously? *You* of all people, asking for one?"

"We had to do something," Luke retorted, his voice low but firm. He glanced at Lee, raising his brows as if to drive the point home. "Lee knows it too. We're at rock bottom, Inês—deep down, and there's no way out. The barriers won't last forever. And when they fail? Then what?"

Inês pressed her lips together, her jaw tightening, but she didn't argue. She couldn't—not when she knew, just as well as he did, that this was necessary.

There was no way out.

“The Golden Fleece is said to have extraordinary healing properties,” Lee interjected, his voice soft, though there was tension in the way his hands were clenched. “It’s said to heal the sick, to provide fertility to crops, to protect entire kingdoms from harm. It was the symbol of kingship. Jason retrieved it for that very purpose—proof of his right to rule. He hung it in a sacred grove dedicated to the Warrior. It was guarded there by a dragon. And… it stayed, until Jason handed it to his uncle.”

A heavy pause followed, thick with unspoken questions.

“Then where is it now?” Inês asked, leaning back as she ran a hand through her hair, clearly frustrated. Her gaze flicked between Lee and Luke. “That palace in Iolcus? On the Old Lands? That would be suicide.”

Luke rested his elbow on the table, propping his cheek on his hand as he stared off to the side, lost in thought.

He knew where the Fleece was—on the Sea of Monsters, guarded by that half-blind cyclops, Polyphemus, or something like that.

But as he tried to think of a way to bring it up without drawing too much suspicion, a voice from behind startled him—and, judging by the way Inês nearly yanked out a chunk of her own hair, her too.

Lee, on the other hand, simply turned around, calm.

“It’s on the Sea of Monsters,” Annabeth declared, her tone serious.

She stood behind them with Percy, who looked like he’d rather be anywhere else. His discomfort was obvious as his eyes darted between Annabeth and the table.

Well, that worked out nicely. Luke didn’t even have to say a word. He loved when things played out like that—kept people from thinking he was crazy.

“And how exactly did you come to that conclusion, Annabeth?” Luke asked, raising an eyebrow to prompt her.

“Percy’s been having dreams,” Annabeth said, stepping forward and pulling Percy along with her.

He stiffened under the weight of their collective attention, even Mr. D’s. The god, mid-sip of his drink, actually paused to listen.

“He saw the Fleece,” she continued, “hanging on a tree on an island, guarded by a big cyclops. And from his description, it sounds like Polyphemus.”

She glanced at Percy for a brief moment before adding, “The Gray Sisters gave him the coordinates.”

She glanced at Percy, her eyes gleaming with expectation, urging him to speak.

“Uh, 30, 31, 75, 12,” Percy mumbled, shuffling awkwardly. “Navigation coordinates. Latitude and longitude. I… learned it in social studies.”

“Thirty degrees, thirty-one minutes north. Seventy-five degrees, twelve minutes west,” Annabeth clarified, her expression alight with satisfaction. “That puts it somewhere in the Atlantic—the Sea of Monsters.”

“The Gray Sisters…” Lee murmured, narrowing his eyes in thought. There was a flicker of surprise on his face. “What a coincidence they gave you that, kid. I remember they offered guidance to Perseus—the *original* Perseus.” He shrugged, as if the name needed no further explanation. “You know, the one we all study in Ancient Greece lessons.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Luke caught Mr. D scowling at the mention of Perseus.

The god muttered something under his breath about heroes and rejecting worship, then shot a sharp look at Pentheus. The poor guy stiffened visibly, though he avoided meeting Mr. D’s gaze, choosing instead to stare straight ahead, as if a random spot on the wall was the most fascinating thing in the room.

“Yeah, yeah, great coincidence or whatever,” Inês cut in, twisting a strand of hair around her fingers. The gesture, though casual, carried more judgment than sweetness. “But how do we know any of this is true? Right now, it’s just a supposition we’re running with.”

Annabeth frowned, the corners of her mouth tightening. Percy, meanwhile, looked unsurprised—though there was a flicker of disappointment in his expression, as if he’d hoped for more support.

Luke sighed, dragging a hand down his face. Then, he turned to his friend. “Inês—”

Whatever he was about to say was interrupted by the door swinging open.

Clarisse strode in, her face pale and drawn, worry etched into her features. Yet there was no mistaking the fierce determination in the set of her jaw.

“The Oracle has spoken.”

A ripple of tension broke in the room, relief settling over them like a collective sigh. For a moment, the weight of uncertainty seemed to lift.

Luke, however, couldn’t shake his unease.

He wondered, his thoughts spiraling despite himself, if the prophecy was still the same. His chest tightened as doubt crept in. Had his actions, his very existence here, altered something? A faint thread of hope coiled within him—hope for change, hope for something different—but even that hope felt fragile, like reaching for something already slipping away.

“Speak, then, Clarisse,” Mr. D drawled lazily, though his eyes betrayed his true interest. “Tell us your prophecy.”

Clarisse drew in a deep breath, her jaw tightening as if bracing herself. Her gaze swept across the room, lingering on each face for a moment before she began to speak.

*Across the sea where monsters dwell,*

*Through trials deep, where shadows swell,*

*The pride of war shall lead the way,*

*As wisdom weaves through night and day.*

*A lost soul waits where truth lies veiled,*

*A beast prowls mad where all else has failed.*

As Clarisse's voice faded, a momentary hush settled over the room. But it didn't last long—whispers began to ripple through the group almost immediately.

"Well, it seems it *is* the Sea of Monsters, after all. Congratulations, Annie Bell and Peter Johnson—you were right," Mr. D drawled, sounding utterly indifferent as he sipped from his drink.

Percy grimaced, his face scrunching in irritation as he shot the god a *look.*

Before Percy could retort, Charles spoke up, his tone thoughtful. "The part about 'wisdom weaves'? That's gotta mean someone from Cabin Six, right?"

Annabeth straightened at the suggestion, glancing at Clarisse. Clarisse glared back, then sighed and rolled her eyes, lifting a hand to signal Annabeth to wait.

"Yeah, but what about the 'lost soul waits' part?" Miranda Gardner, the head counselor of Cabin Four, chimed in. Sweet and level-headed, though always at odds with his siblings, she frowned as she spoke. "Does that mean someone's going to die?"

"Doesn't it make more sense for it to mean they'll find someone?" Castor countered, his brow furrowing. Pollux nodded in agreement beside him.

Luke's chest tightened.

*Lost soul.*

His jaw clenched, and his fingers dug into his pocket, clutching the card tucked there as if it could anchor him.

"And the 'beast' part—that could be the cyclops," Annabeth said, rubbing her chin, her eyes narrowing as her thoughts seemed to race. "But we already knew that much. 'Mad,' though? Maybe it's from being nearly blinded by Odysseus. Or it could fit with it being in the place where all else has failed—he did fail to defeat Odysseus, after all. But…" She trailed off, her face twisting into a frustrated grimace.

Luke watched her, seeing the gears turning in her mind, but before she could finish her thought, a sharp sound cut through the room.

Mr. D clapped his hands together, the abrupt noise snapping everyone's attention to him. Rising from his seat, his chair scraped noisily against the floor.

"Well, one thing is clear," he said, his tone dripping with disinterest. "Carlyse here will go retrieve the Golden Fleece. It's in the Sea of Monsters. So…" He waved a dismissive hand at Clarisse as though this were all an annoying formality. "Choose your companions already, so we can wrap this up and I can get back to doing something actually important."

Clarisse hesitated, her eyes sweeping the room as if weighing her options. Her gaze landed on Annabeth first—no surprise there.

They were friends, though neither liked to admit it, and there had always been that unspoken promise of going on a quest together, the one Clarisse had never quite forgiven Annabeth for breaking when she went with Percy first.

But then her gaze shifted, landing on Luke.

"I choose Annabeth Chase and Luke Castellan."

*Huh.*

Luke felt a flicker of surprise at that—despite himself. That surprise, however, was quickly swallowed by something heavier.

He shook it off as best he could, but it lingered, as it always did.

*Levi. The dragon. The nymphs. So much blood. That golden apple.*

Still, he admitted to himself, if Clarisse hadn't chosen him, he would've found a way to join anyway. Whether by convincing her or sneaking out, nothing would have stopped him.

This time, no one would. This time, he would act. He would play the game of the three old hags.

And he would *win.*

From the corner of his eye, Luke caught Percy's reaction. Percy's head snapped toward Annabeth, then toward him, his expression shifting rapidly—surprise melting into anger. Frustration etched itself deep into Percy's features, his annoyance obvious.

To Luke's relief, though, Percy kept quiet. For now, at least.

Even so, Luke couldn't help but wonder if the boy would manage to find his way onto the mission anyway.

*Hermes.*

The name crossed Luke's mind like a bitter wind, and he grimaced, his mood souring instantly. Hermes had no reason to interfere—not this time. Luke wasn't the traitor, after all. And Hermes? He couldn't even be bothered to claim Chris, let alone give a single damn about Luke's little brother.

*Filho da puta*[1].

Luke shoved the thought aside, forcing himself to focus on the present.

Mr. D's expression twisted into a brief grimace. His mouth tightened as his gaze flicked toward Luke, lingering for a fleeting moment before smoothing over again.

"Then so be it," his uncle said, his voice sharp with disinterest. "You brats will leave tomorrow. Prepare until then—pray, grab your weapons, gather your magical trinkets, or whatever it is you heroes do before these idiotic quests."

He turned to leave but paused at the door. For a moment, he stood still, then glanced back. His gaze locked on Luke, and for a fraction of a second, his expression was unreadable.

"Try to come back alive," he added, his tone almost casual, though an edge cut through the words. "And with the Golden Fleece, preferably. We're all counting on you."

Chapter End Notes

1 - filho da puta - son of a bitch

The aftermath of the storm. I tried to keep the Stymphalian birds accurate—man-eaters—which only added to the trauma, with all the half-eaten bodies scattered around. Camp suffered heavy losses, and something had to be done. That's exactly what the meeting was for.

A quest was inevitable, really. Luke was already pushed to the brink—first the scare with Connor, then the deaths in his cabin, and across the entire Camp. He had no patience left. So he demanded it. No more waiting, no more politeness—he was finally growing a backbone.

Once again, Clarisse was given the quest. Mr. D only did it because he was losing control of the situation—Luke was making too much sense, and Mr. D knows how the gods work. He caved because Luke challenged him in front of everyone, and his words could plant dangerous little seeds in the other campers' minds.

Anyway, thank you all for reading! I hope you enjoyed it, and I appreciate every comment—no matter if you're late to the party!

What do you guys think the prophecy means?

# Chapter 53: SoM - Prayers

Chapter Summary

> The preparation before setting off. Luke watches Cabin Ten in their prayers but pointedly avoids attending his own cabin's honoring of Hermes. Oh yeah - Mercury kind of makes an appearance...?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Luke's things were packed, laid out meticulously on the bed. A mix of essentials and simple practicality. Snacks—long-lasting ones like chips and cookies, not the healthiest but reliable. The obligatory ambrosia and nectar. A map of the area, though he doubted its usefulness since the Sea of Monsters was… well, the Sea of Monsters. A copy of *The Odyssey*—he thought it prudent—and another of *The Argonautica*, just in case. Clothes, money. Not everything, but enough to maybe catch a plane or something if needed.

He paused, his hand hovering mid-air, brows furrowing as memories stirred. He remembered, vaguely, from the books and more vividly from his childhood, when quests were routine for demigods—sometimes even back-to-back. Traveling by plane had been common then, especially for getting back to Camp quickly.

But it had its risks.

Aubrey had explained planes to him once, calling them fast but dangerous. Monsters circled above, sure, but the real danger, she'd said, was the one sitting inside with you.

*There's no escape, little brother,* she'd said, her voice quiet and firm. *Only the struggle for your life. Maybe you win...* She'd trailed off then, her gaze distant, tracing that scar on her arm with her fingers. *Or maybe you lose.*

His hand dropped, curling into a fist at his side. He wondered what she would say now—if she'd offer some advice, or if she'd simply press her lips together and furrow her brows, the way she always did when she faced a problem she didn't know how to solve.

Her memory felt blurry now, her features worn down by time. Sometimes, when the image in his mind became too fuzzy to bear, he'd sneak into Chiron's office just to look at the pictures. There was one of her there—frozen in time, smiling, with Latifa and Axel standing beside her.

Luke stood over his bag, frozen in place for a moment. His fist tightened, nails pressing into his palm, before he caught himself and shook his head, forcing his focus back. His gaze dropped to the bag, and he began checking its contents again. His sword lay haphazardly

tossed on the bed beside it, along with the course catalog from New Rome University he'd been reading earlier.

He'd let himself daydream then, flipping through the pages while his campers slept, pretending—just for a moment—that he was normal. That he could choose a course, wonder which ones might suit him, which sounded interesting, like he had a future that didn't revolve around monsters or gods.

And he'd done it again before gathering his things, indulging in the foolish notion of what it might be like, even knowing better.

But now he was alone, his campers having left to… honor Hermes.

Luke wouldn't be doing that.

*Not anymore.*

His teeth clenched.

Methodically, he went through each item in his bag, as if the repetition might reveal what he'd overlooked. Maybe it would soothe the knot of anxiety coiling in his chest, even if only a little.

He knew the islands would be dangerous—he just didn't know *how* dangerous.

The trio in the books had survived because of Hermes' gifts—Luke remembered that much. Odysseus, too, had been helped by Hermes, receiving a gift from him. The thought made Luke shake his head sharply, glaring at nothing as irritation bubbled beneath the surface.

Then there was the disaster of entering the Sea of Monsters—the moment Percy, Annabeth, and Tyson lost the bags. Luke's mind latched onto the memory with a twinge of frustration, running through the details.

*Charybdis* .

The name echoed like a warning bell. What could he even do against something like that? Stick to the thin line outside its reach? Risk Scylla instead? Neither option offered much comfort. Luke gritted his teeth, his fingers curling tightly around the fabric of his bag. A moment passed before he exhaled sharply, forcing himself to release his grip and refocus, his hands moving as he went back to checking his things.

The cyclops, at least, was a tangible threat—something he could maybe prepare for. But the Camp Store didn't exactly stock tools for dealing with Polyphemus or his man-eating sheep.

*Still,* he thought, tracing the title of *The Odyssey*—the ancient Greek letters, Ὀδύσσεια, etched into the cover—and letting his fingers linger over the small illustration of a ship. *I can always imitate Odysseus.*

If it came to that, his gaze drifted darkly to his sword, he'd blind that monster until it saw nothing but darkness. Maybe even strip it of its other senses too, just as a treat. The thought

pulled a smirk to his lips.

Percy, Annabeth, and Tyson had gone out there with only the standard demigod kit—nothing special beyond the magical gifts Hermes had given Percy. Luke's eyes flicked back to his own bag. It was meticulously packed, down to the books, with even a few extras thrown in. But carrying too much would weigh him down.

Still, the magical tools…

Luke pressed his lips into a thin line, his jaw tightening as his glare shifted to the wall, focusing on nothing.

He wasn't going to ask his dad. Not for anything.

But Circe's island… Luke sighed, collapsing onto his bed and dragging a hand over his face. The lack of those candies could be an issue if they ended up there—a risk, at least for him. Now, in this reincarnation, he was a man—which was… fine, he supposed. It was strange, sure, but he'd gotten used to it. The adjustment had been rough at first, awkward, but he'd never felt out of place in his own skin. Not truly.

He ignored the memory of puberty—of dealing with *that* at random, inconvenient moments.

It had been... bothersome. Still was, even now.

Still, the thought lingered: Did he count? Almost a woman? He had been one in *the before*, after all. In theory, it made sense. Maybe. Perhaps. Probably not…

He huffed, rubbing the bridge of his nose. The thoughts were circling, going nowhere useful. Then, abruptly, his thigh burned. His hand dropped, reaching into his pocket as he pulled out the card. It was warm, just enough to grab his attention, not hot enough to cause pain.

*Finally*. The leech had answered, though it felt like far too much time had passed. Luke frowned, his fingers toying with the edges of the card.

Why hadn't Mercury responded immediately? He could admit—grudgingly—that he'd only sent the message a few minutes ago, maybe half an hour tops. But the irritation still bubbled under his skin. Surely, Mercury had godly things to do—important, divine matters, or whatever.

Still, Luke hadn't slept, too wound up with worry and anxiety, and it made him jittery, moody. In his mind, Mercury should've answered the moment he'd reached out. That was the point of having a god's direct line, wasn't it?

The card warmed in his hand, and elegant calligraphy appeared on its surface:

*Hello, Jewel.*

Luke rolled his eyes at the nickname.

*How rare it is for you to reach out first. I must admit, I find myself intrigued.*

The letters lingered for just a moment before fading, and new ones replaced them:

*Shall we meet again this weekend? I've found a restaurant that might suit your palate—one that aligns with the dishes you mentioned missing, and I can personally vouch for its quality. Or, if you'd prefer, perhaps a library?*

Luke turned the card over in his hand, his expression tightening with thought. After a moment, he focused and willed his response onto the surface. The letters appeared quickly, neat and unembellished—direct, much like his own handwriting.

*I can't. I've got a quest, and I'm leaving today. That's what I wanted to talk to you about.*

The card remained still in his palm, the seconds stretching as Luke waited. He wondered if Mercury would answer at all.

Then, with a gentle warmth, new words materialized.

*Ah, a quest, is it? How intriguing. And what grand task has been entrusted to you and your companions?*

To Luke, the words didn't feel entirely genuine. There was something—an edge, maybe. Not mocking, exactly, but not entirely neutral either.

He hesitated, rolling the card between his fingers as he debated his response.

With a sigh, he focused, willing his reply onto the card: *It's to get the Golden Fleece, in the Sea of Monsters. Camp barriers are weak and getting worse. It's the only thing we thought could help.*

There was another pause—a longer one this time. Then, elegant letters appeared once more: *Ulysses' journey?*

*Yeah,* Luke replied, his brow furrowing. Roman name. Of course Mercury would use that. He continued, *Kind of. Maybe. It's in the same place.*

*I see.*

The curt response made Luke tilt his head. His lips twitched with the urge to frown, but he pushed the thought aside. Outside, the faint sound of a commotion reached his ears, reminding him that time was slipping away.

He needed to move.

*Anyway, I wanted to ask…*

He paused, letting the words linger incomplete. Hesitation gnawed at him. Abigail had been missing for so long that asking about her outright felt strange, almost unreal.

But he was leaving soon, setting off on a dangerous quest—*dragon, Levi, so much blood*—and this might be his only chance to ask.

*Hope*. A dangerous thing to feel.

Luke bit the inside of his cheek, steeling himself.

*Indeed?* Mercury's prompt appeared.

Luke drew a breath, forcing himself to ask before he could falter again: *You said you knew where my sister was. Could you tell me where?* His throat felt tight, his fingers rolling the card between them as if trying to knead away the nerves. Then, gripping the card firmly, he added, *Please, Mercúrio*.*

He watched the words fade, his heart pounding as he waited. And waited. The longer it went without a response, the harder it became to keep his composure. His hands trembled, and something bitter clawed its way up his chest. *Of course*. Of course, he couldn't trust a god to help him. Not even one who had claimed to know, who had promised to tell him—

His mind spiraled, resentment and frustration knotting together into something suffocating.

Then—

*She's in the Sea of Monsters,* the words finally appeared. *That is what I know. Somewhere on one of the islands there.*

Luke's chest tightened, his gaze locked on the card as new words began to form.

*For a mortal, she's surprisingly slippery, though I confess I have not personally tracked her. What I know comes from Hermes, and this knowledge…* The letters paused briefly, as if considering. *…is incomplete. I could not infer more than that.*

It hit Luke like a wave, knocking the breath from his chest and leaving him momentarily disoriented. The relief was so immense he sank back onto his bed, staring at the ceiling as a small, tentative smile crept across his face. A weak laugh slipped out—soft at first, but it grew, becoming louder, fuller, until it turned into real laughter.

Almost joy.

The Sea of Monsters. The same place he was going—that was where she was. He could look for her there!

The enormity of the Sea, its dangers, the sheer impossibility of the search—none of it mattered in that moment. He had a direction. A *chance*.

And that was more than he'd had in years.

The laughter eventually faded, but the smile lingered. Luke pushed himself upright, the card still in his hand, ready to respond. Before he could, a knock at the door interrupted him. A voice called his name, pulling him out of his thoughts. He glanced toward the window, noting how high the sun had climbed.

It was nearly noon.

Time had run out.

The quest was about to begin.

“Just a second!” he shouted, his voice breaking the stillness of the room as he scrambled to gather his things.

He moved quickly, slinging his backpack over his shoulder, securing his sword at his hip, and snatching up the card one last time.

Luke focused, willing his message onto it: *I have to go now.*

He hesitated, his fingers hovering over the card, then added: *Thank you, Mercury. Really.*

The response came almost immediately, the warmth of the card spreading through his palm.

*How sweet, columba.*

The words lingered briefly before shifting into new ones:

*As for your quest… I cannot do much, but keep the card close. Always.*

There was a pause this time, heavier.

*Fortuna tecum sit.*

The words faded slowly, leaving the card blank. Luke stared at the empty surface, lost in thought, before shaking himself out of it. Slipping the card back into his pocket, he nodded slightly to himself. It made sense to keep it close—after all, if he could call Mercury directly, why wouldn’t he?

Satisfied with his reasoning, he nodded to himself and headed for the door.

As soon as he opened it, he was greeted by Dean’s face, the satyr’s arms crossed and a deep frown etched onto his features. His hooves tapped against the floor in an impatient rhythm, as though he’d been waiting for hours instead of the couple of minutes it had actually been.

Luke barely had time to shut the door behind him before Dean blurted out, his words coming fast, almost tripping over themselves.

“I think Grover and that Percy kid have an empathy bond.”

Luke raised a brow at Dean, giving him a look that said *really?* He already knew. Between the books from his past life, Annabeth’s talk about Percy’s dreams, and his own ability to connect the dots, it wasn’t exactly a revelation.

Then again, Luke wasn’t exactly the best example of normal reasoning.

“I smell it on the kid,” Dean continued, waving his hand in the air—quick, almost flailing, with a kind of jerky energy Luke would’ve found funny if it weren’t so strange. “Under all

that scent of fish—disgusting, by the way, and strong—and the salty smell, you know."

"The sea," Luke muttered, leaning back slightly as Dean leaned in, his eyes wide and more than a little manic.

"Yes! The sea or whatever," Dean said, almost triumphantly. "But I smell it—it's an empathy bond. I'm *sure* of it."

Luke stepped back, shooting Dean a pointed glare as he reclaimed his personal space.

"Right. Sure," he muttered, brushing past the satyr. He had better things to do—like finding Annabeth and Clarisse before they set off.

As he walked away, he threw a smirk over his shoulder. "How can you be so sure, anyway? You couldn't even smell me when I was nine and on the streets. Made you circle around for days, if I remember right, until you got lucky."

Dean sputtered behind him. "That's different! You were hiding your scent!"

"Yeah, yeah," Luke called back, his smirk widening as he waved dismissively. "Best nose, huh?"

"I'll have you know I'm one of the best noses in the Searchers," Dean huffed, falling into step beside him, his tone indignant.

"If you say so," Luke replied absently, his attention snagged elsewhere.

His gaze locked onto a stream of campers emerging from Cabin Ten—the nightmare Barbie Dreamhouse of Camp Half-Blood. Normally, that crowd meant trouble, chaos, or, at the very least, noise.

But today…

Luke furrowed his brows. The scene was unusual. The entire cabin was filing out together, their faces uncharacteristically serious. No laughter, no snide comments, no gossiping—just silence. They moved in unison, carrying objects in their hands, heading in the same direction.

His lips pressed into a thin line.

*Strange.*

"…and she chose you, which makes sense. You've done this before, you've got the experience. But this is the first one you're going on since… since that time." Dean's voice broke through the noise. "They could've sent that Percy kid instead, couldn't they? Didn't he go on a big one last year? And he's the son of the Lord of the Sea, you know—sea is kind of his whole thing."

Luke's attention lingered on the crowd ahead, his gaze snagging on Inês. She stood apart from her siblings, her expression unusually solemn as she watched them pass. The sight

unsettled him, but Dean's hand landed firmly on his shoulder, pulling him back to the moment.

"He's just a kid," Luke replied, his tone clipped but light. "And if this quest is about stealing the Fleece, who better than the son of the Thief?"

He forced a smile, but it felt hollow, and his eyes darted away from Dean's concerned stare.

Dean's grip on his shoulder tightened slightly. "Just… be careful," he said, his voice quieter now. "It's been a long time since your last quest. Things out there—" he hesitated, searching for the right words—"they're different now. More dangerous."

With a heavy sigh, Luke started walking again, heading toward Inês. "I know, I'll be careful." He tried to lighten the mood, offering a faint smirk as he added, "When am I not? I'm the overbearing mama bird, paranoia incarnate, eyes on the back of my head—what was the other one? Oh, right. Worrywart supreme."

"Hah, mama bird," Dean snorted, falling into step beside him. "From little bird to mama bird. How times have changed."

"Not so much if I'm still a bird," Luke retorted, a faint smirk tugging at his lips. But the humor didn't last long, his expression sobering as they reached Inês.

He stepped up beside her.

Dean fell into place on Luke's other side, and the three of them stood in silence, watching as the Cabin Ten procession moved toward the beach. All of them were dressed in light-colored clothes—flowing garments, chitons, Luke realized belatedly. The quiet crunch of footsteps mingled with the soft rustle of the wind through the leaves, filling the stillness.

Then Inês spoke, her gaze fixed on her siblings as they moved toward the beach.

"We are going to honor our godly mother," she explained, her tone calm. She turned her gaze to Luke. "Just as Cabin Five are honoring their godly father now—for your quest, for Clarisse's quest—for its success."

It was only then that Luke truly noticed her attire—flowing, light blue garments that shimmered as if she were draped in the waters of the sea. Rings encircled her arms, her hair swept up with delicate strands of jewelry woven through, and golden earrings swayed gently with her movements. Her makeup was subtle yet masterful, deepening the warmth of her brown eyes and making them seem rounder, more striking.

It was all designed to make her look soft, delicate—Luke could see that much. But there was nothing delicate about her demeanor. Her posture was rigid, her expression severe, and the weight of responsibility clung to her like armor.

"I see," Luke replied, his tone matching her solemnity, though a faint frown tugged at the corners of his mouth. His gaze drifted toward the forest, shadows crossing his face as his thoughts strayed.

His own campers had done the same earlier—gone to honor Hermes. For his quest. For his protection, too. So that he might succeed. He could still hear the words Travis had murmured in the quiet hours of the morning, thinking he wasn't listening—a hushed, hopeful prayer:

*Hermes Enodios, guardian of travelers and guide of paths, grant Luke nimble hands and swift feet. Shield his journey from harm, and light his way with your wisdom.*

It was pointless. Useless. But if it brought them comfort, he wasn't going to stop them. Instead, he'd claimed he wasn't feeling well, excusing himself from the ritual. It only seemed to worry them more, but he waved it off and urged them to go without him.

And they did. They were probably still out there, offering words and sacrifices to a god who wouldn't care enough to help. None of them would. Since when did gods ever help?

Luke's expression tightened, his eyes darkening as he forced himself back to the present.

Inês's eyes were on him, her gaze knowing, as if she could see every thought crossing his mind. She didn't press, didn't prod—just sighed, the sound heavy.

"We're praying," she began, her tone calm but measured, her eyes locking onto his. There was a message there, unspoken but clear enough, and Luke clicked his tongue in frustration. "So she can safeguard your passage through the waters. At least until you reach the Sea of Monsters."

She hesitated then, her composure faltering. Her eyes flickered with sorrow and conflict, emotions too raw to conceal. Her breath hitched as if caught on the weight of what she was about to say. Her brow furrowed, her lips pressing together before parting again, softer now, barely audible.

"And… for Drew."

"Drew?" Luke echoed, the name pulling him up short. Only now did he realize he hadn't seen her since… the birds. Since that day.

His heart pounded.

*Did something happen to her?* The thought clawed at him, and his chest tightened. His mind, unbidden, dragged him back to Connor—so small, so pale under those blankets. Alive, but still enough to look almost…

Luke exhaled sharply, forcing the memory aside. Silently, he clasped his hands together, tilting his head just slightly—a motion so subtle that neither of the two noticed.

*Lord Jesus, please... shield her from this pain. She's carried enough already. Don't let her bear more than she can take.*

"She… she was hurt, you know," Inês began, her voice unsteady, cracking slightly on the last word. "One of the birds got her." She paused, her lips pressing into a thin line, her gaze dropping. "Her face. We thought… but she's a little better now. She's going too, to do the

ritual. She's already there—Silena took her." The words stumbled out. "We hope… I don't even know what to hope. But Drew asked, and we've already lost—"

Her voice hitched, breaking off as her eyes filled with tears. She blinked hard, chasing them away before they could fall. She opened her mouth, but no words came, and after a moment, she simply gestured for them to follow.

Luke and Dean moved after her. They walked until the packed dirt softened into sand, the grains clinging to their feet as they moved closer to the shoreline.

When the sand gave way to water, they stopped, holding back as Inês moved forward. Her chiton trailed into the shallows, its edges merging with the seafoam. The fabric and the water seemed to blend into each other, becoming one, until Luke could no longer tell where the sea began or where she ended.

Luke watched as she stepped into the center of the circle formed by Cabin Ten, gathered around a small altar made of driftwood and stones. He stayed silent, simply listening, with Dean just as quiet beside him.

"Aphrodite Pontia, of the Sea, she who was born from the sea foam, we call upon your divine grace," Cabin Ten intoned in unison.

Inês stepped forward, holding a small bundle of incense in her hands. She lit it with precision, placing it carefully on the altar. Her hands lingered there for a moment, resting on the wood and stone, before she bowed deeply and raised her arms to the sea. Her cabin followed her lead, their movements practiced and reverent.

Her voice rose above the others, strong and steady, carrying over the sound of the waves. "Bless those who journey across your waters, and shield them from harm."

Then Inês straightened, and one by one, as if following a silent signal, the campers stepped forward into the sea. Each carried offerings—seashells, flowers, small tokens. Some tilted libations of milk or honey into the water, murmuring soft prayers. Their voices joined in unison, rising and falling like the waves themselves.

"Aphrodite, we give these offerings to you, goddess of the sea. Protect those brave demigods who will face the trials ahead to save us all. May your gentle waves carry them safely, and may no storm find them. Let your love and grace guide them back to shore, unharmed and at peace."

The final words hung in the air, and silence fell. Slowly, the campers returned to their places in the shallow waters.

Inês stood at the altar alone, her gaze fixed on the horizon, unblinking. She lingered there, still as a statue, before finally turning—and that was when Luke saw her.

Silena was guiding Drew toward the altar. The campers parted silently, creating a clear path for them. Their faces were neutral, unreadable, but the air around them felt heavy with unspoken grief.

*Suffocating.*

Luke's breath hitched, his chest tightening.

The entire left side of her face was wrapped in gauze, stark against her skin, already stained with fresh blood seeping through. She winced with each step, her pain evident in every careful movement. But even through it all, there was defiance in her posture—a stubborn determination that carried her forward, one trembling step at a time, until she finally reached the altar.

Silena helped her sit with a tenderness that was almost unbearable to watch, her expression etched with sorrow. For a moment, she lingered, brushing Drew's hair back with a lightness that spoke volumes, before stepping away to stand beside Inês. Luke followed her retreat with his eyes—until something in Drew's hands caught his attention.

A glint of metal.

At first, Luke thought it was a blade. But as Drew lifted it, trembling, he realized it wasn't.

*A feather.*

A metallic feather from one of the Stymphalian birds, its sharp edges catching the sunlight.

Blood still clung to it, dark and viscous, as though refusing to dry. Drew held it in trembling hands, cradling it like something sacred. Slowly, with care, she leaned forward and placed it onto the altar. She set it upright, the pointed tip angled outward toward the sea, gleaming in the light like a silent warning.

Then Cabin Ten chanted once again, their voices weaving a melody that carried over the gentle waves. But Luke couldn't tear his eyes away from Drew, seated before the altar. The water lapped softly around her, reaching her chest, and though she was pale, her eyes shone with defiance.

*"Aphrodite Ourania, goddess of celestial grace, hear this plea, let your power embrace her. Soothe and heal her skin with your beauty, let renewal and grace begin. Like waves upon the shore, soft and sure—grant your touch, and let her hurt no more."*

The words lingered in the air. Then Luke *saw* it.

The waves shifted, growing subtly, and the surface of the water began to glow faintly. His breath caught as the memory hit him. It was just like that night all those years ago—on a shore, beneath the stars, praying not to his own God, but to the gods of his aunt.

Gods whose names he'd known, and who had known his in return.

The light pulsed gently, the sea answering their call.

A wave rose, towering above the altar—higher than Drew herself—and came crashing down with a force that made Luke's chest tighten. For a moment, panic surged through him. He felt

Dean stiffen beside him, and the same fear gripped them both: the sea would take Drew. She was too weak. She wouldn't be able to swim—

But the wave receded, and Drew was still there.

She sat in place, her gaze fixed ahead. The gauze that had been bloodied and stained was now clean.

And on her lap… the feather.

It still pointed toward the sea. Its edges, once caked with dark, heavy blood, were now sharp and pristine, almost radiant. It glowed faintly, and Luke could *see* it.

*A divine weapon.*

The final prayers of gratitude were spoken, voices carrying on the sea breeze. Luke watched as the cabin gathered around Drew in a circle, Inês at the front with Silena beside her. Their postures were tense but hopeful, relief etched into their faces as they watched Drew begin to unwrap the gauze.

But then—

A *scar*.

It ran along her left side. It wasn't as bad as it could've been—Luke noted with a flicker of relief that she hadn't been blinded. Still, Drew's hand brushed over the marred skin, and her expression fell. Her shoulders drooped, her face crumpling as her fingers lingered on the uneven texture.

A heavy silence settled over the group, uncertainty hanging in the air like a storm cloud. No one seemed to know what to say, the relief from moments before fading into hesitation.

Then Silena stepped forward, her brows furrowed and her expression sharp. She glared at the circle, at Drew, at everyone. With deliberate movements, she took the feather from Drew's lap, holding it high. Her voice rang out.

"Mother has spoken! She blessed Drew!"

Inês seemed to gather her composure at that moment, stepping forward to take control before chaos could bloom, her sharp gaze catching Drew's conflicted expression.

"So she did," Inês said, her tone steady and commanding. "And we listen." She clapped her hands once, the sound sharp, sweeping her eyes across her gathered siblings. "We've done our part here. Let's finish up, clean this, and return to our cabin. Perhaps take a moment to bid farewell to the questers."

One by one, the campers of Cabin Ten began to disperse. As they passed Luke, some offered him pats on the shoulder, murmuring small wishes of luck or whispered prayers.

Drew left with the others, her steps steadier but still marked with stiffness. Silena walked close beside her, her expression tense with concern as she leaned in to whisper something.

Whatever Silena said, Drew's scowl deepened, her jaw tightening before she muttered something sharp in reply. Luke caught the faint glimmer of wetness in her eyes just before she turned away abruptly, her head bowed as she hurried off. Silena didn't rush after her. Instead, she followed at a slower pace, the metallic feather still clasped tightly in her hands.

"Luke."

Inês's voice drew his attention, forcing him to reluctantly tear his gaze away and turn toward her.

She stood a few paces away, a seashell in her hands, turning it over between her fingers. After a moment, she stopped and said, "Desejo-te boa sorte nesta tua viagem.[1]"

Luke smiled, small but genuine. "Obrigado, Inês. De verdade.[2]"

For a moment, she hesitated, then held the seashell out to him. It was beautiful, its shape almost unnaturally perfect, a blend of soft pinks, blues, and greens that shifted with hints of iridescent colors. He took it, rolling it between his fingers, inspecting its smooth surface before lifting his gaze.

"Why the sudden gift?" he asked.

"Maybe it'll be of some help," she replied, her tone quiet. "It's mine. I found it back home, before… you know, before coming here."

Luke stilled, his brows furrowing. The shell was clearly precious to her, and he hesitated, wondering if it was really okay for her to give him something so valuable. He opened his mouth to ask, but a sound interrupted him.

Cheers. Loud and enthusiastic, cutting through the air. Then the unmistakable sound of something big moving in the water, drawing closer.

Luke snapped his head toward the noise. A crowd had gathered a little ways ahead on the beach, campers from every cabin filtering in, though Cabin Five stood at the forefront. Clarisse stood among them, her stance rigid as she stared out at the sea. From this distance, Luke couldn't make out her expression.

And from the water—

A ship emerged, a warship. Its silhouette loomed larger as it approached, the name painted starkly against its hull.

*CSS Birmingham.*

Luke's breath hitched for a moment. He remembered it from the books—a gift from Ares to Clarisse, a warship with a crew for her to command.

As the CSS Birmingham slowed and anchored near the shore, his gaze sharpened. Figures moved across the deck, their motions oddly fluid, yet... stiff, unnatural. Even before his mind could summon the memory from a life he had once lived, something in his gut told him the truth.

These weren't people.

They were *shades.*

With a deep breath, Luke smiled at Inês and Dean. Their attempts to smile back were marred by worry, which gentled his own expression. Tilting his head toward the growing crowd, he gestured for them to follow before heading in that direction.

Their footsteps trailed closely behind him.

The closer they got, the larger the gathering grew. It felt like the entire Camp was there, drawn to the scene.

Luke's gaze landed on Mr. D, who had seemingly appeared out of nowhere. The god stood apart from the main crowd, nearer to Clarisse. His arms were crossed, his posture composed, but his gaze was fixed on the ship with an expression Luke couldn't quite read.

Annabeth was already there too, positioned near Clarisse and slightly off to the side. Percy stood close by, almost shadowing her as she spoke with Clarisse. Both of them were fully geared—bags slung over their shoulders, weapons at ready. Luke's eyes caught the glint of Annabeth's magical cap, clipped securely to her belt.

The moment Luke stepped closer, a cheer erupted from the gathered campers. He smiled awkwardly, the sudden attention making him shift slightly. His gaze scanned the crowd until it landed on Lee, whose face still bore the signs of exhaustion. Despite that, Lee's amber eyes held a sharp worry as they locked onto Luke's.

Silently, Lee mouthed, *Be careful.*

Luke nodded, mouthing back with a faint smile, *I always am.*

His gaze drifted again, catching sight of the youngest Apollo camper standing near Lee. Will, Luke remembered. The boy offered a small wave, his expression earnest, and Luke waved back before continuing toward Annie and the others. Inês broke off to rejoin her siblings, leaving Dean to trail beside Luke as they reached the shore.

"So, are you little brats ready to go? I see even a ship," Mr. D remarked dryly as soon as Luke stepped within earshot.

Clarisse straightened at the comment, her posture proud. There was a flicker of happiness in her expression, a relief that eased some of the severity she'd carried these past days.

"It's a gift from my father."

“I knew that already, Carlyse,” Mr. D said with a dismissive wave. His gaze flicked to Luke, and for a moment, his expression changed, a flicker of something heavier settling over his features. “You all need to leave. There’s no time to waste.” His voice dropped slightly, just enough for Luke to catch the muttered words that followed. “The gods decided to help with the barriers, bolster our numbers. And wasn’t *that* a headache—getting them to act now.”

Straightening, Mr. D slipped back into his usual aloof tone, gesturing vaguely. “In any case, we’re counting on you and all that.”

With that, he turned on his heel, sauntering off as if bored of the entire scene. But as he passed Luke, his voice dropped to a whisper, the words meant only for him. “Good luck, nephew. May you come back victorious.”

Luke blinked, startled, and then his uncle was gone.

“Let’s get going, then,” Clarisse declared, tilting her head back to stare at the ship. A rope ladder was tossed over the side, landing with a soft thud on the sand. Without hesitation, she grabbed it and began to climb. The crowd erupted into cheers, her name chanted over and over by her cabinmates as they rallied behind her.

Luke sighed, his hands settling on his hips as he watched the scene. He felt a sudden wave of nerves rise in his chest, though he didn’t let it show. Tilting his head, he adjusted his bag, then turned toward Annabeth, stepping closer to fix the straps on hers, much to her irritation. She glared at him, but let him fuss.

“Well,” Luke said lightly, glancing up at Percy and Dean. “It seems this is goodbye.”

“For now,” Dean interjected quickly, his bushy brows furrowed. “Goodbye *for now.*”

“Yeah,” Percy agreed weakly, a strange look crossing his face. His gaze flickered between Luke, Annabeth, and the ship, his lips pressing together before he forced a smile—a poor attempt that fooled no one. “Bye. I’ll see you all later.”

Luke shot him a look, finishing with Annabeth’s pack and releasing her, wondering for a brief moment if the kid was about to do something stupid. He shrugged the thought off, his pulse quickening as he guided Annabeth toward the ladder.

The crowd had picked up their names now, chanting alongside Clarisse’s as they climbed aboard.

Once on deck, Luke took a moment to survey the ship.

The ship was sturdy, functional, with the faint air of age and something else—something haunted. Luke’s gaze shifted to the shades drifting about. Their forms wavered between greyscale human figures and skeletal outlines, especially if he squinted too long. They paid him no mind, focused solely on their tasks.

At the center of it all was Clarisse, standing tall, barking orders with the confidence of someone who thought they knew what they were doing.

Luke raised a brow, wondering just how much Clarisse actually knew about navigation.

Annabeth brushed past him, heading straight for Clarisse. He watched as her storm-grey eyes narrowed, already calculating. Within moments, Annabeth launched into her plans, speaking rapidly as she gestured toward a makeshift map. Clarisse, predictably, bristled and began disagreeing, her tone rising as she shot back counterarguments. Their voices climbed steadily until the inevitable happened.

A full-blown argument.

Luke sighed, exasperated, tilting his head back to look at the sky. A vulture flew overhead, circling once before disappearing into the horizon. It made him frown—vultures by the shore weren't exactly common. Was this a bad omen? The thought gnawed at him until a shriek snapped his attention back.

Startled, Luke turned to see Clarisse and Annabeth *actually* pulling each other's hair.

*Not even a minute, and they're at it already,* Luke thought, groaning internally as he marched over to break them apart.

"Oh, oh, parou aí,[3]" Luke said firmly, grabbing the back of each girl's shirt and hauling them apart. It was harder than it used to be—they'd both grown, and he briefly wondered if they'd end up taller than him. "Stop it, you two. We're on a quest, and we're a team. We can't afford to get distracted by petty things."

"Petty?" Annabeth snapped, scowling. "We're talking about getting the *Golden Fleece*! We *have* to go to the Bermuda Islands! Everyone knows the Sea of Monsters is there! And Grover—Grover *needs* our help!"

The poor kid really did. But, well, Luke wasn't supposed to know that, so he furrowed his brows, faking confusion as he asked, "What about Grover now?"

"The dreams," Annabeth said, like that should explain everything.

Luke barely had time to react before Annabeth barreled on. "Percy's been dreaming about him—Grover *needs* us! He's the one who found the Golden Fleece, and he's trapped with that cyclops—" Her lips pressed together, worry flashing across her face, plain and obvious. "We *have* to get there, save him, and grab the Fleece all at once. It's all in the same place. We need to move. We need a plan—"

"But before that, we need to figure out *how* to get there, genius!" Clarisse snapped, wrenching herself free from Luke's grip and crossing her arms with a huff.

"Okay, okay," Luke intervened, stepping between them before things could escalate. "We *will* do all that."

He turned to Annabeth, offering what he hoped was a reassuring smile.

Grover would be fine. Luke would make sure of it, even if the worry gnawed at him too. But everything had worked out in the books, and he clung to that. It *had* to be the same this time.

No—better.

“We’ll save Grover, Annie, don’t worry. We’re not leaving him to the monsters.” Then he shifted his attention to Clarisse. “But Clarisse has a point. We need to figure out our path first. No use rushing in blind.”

Her gaze flicked to him at that, her expression softening just a fraction before she masked it.

“That’s actually one of the reasons I chose you,” she admitted, her tone awkward but resolute. “You’re the son of the Traveler. Peter used to say you never get lost. And… well, you’re like… the guy who did that quest.”

Luke blinked at her, processing her words. It wasn’t what he’d expected, but a small smile tugged at his lips before he refocused.

“Well…” he began, pulling his map from his bag and spreading it open. His eyes swept over the routes, analyzing potential stops and obstacles. “I think it’d be smart to stop on land at least once before we head into deep waters. Stock up, maybe do repairs if we need them—just to play it safe.”

He glanced up, catching both girls nodding seriously. No interruptions, no arguments. It was… strange but nice. Being the one with the internal GPS seemed to carry some weight.

“As for the route…” He tapped the map, his brow furrowing in thought. “Norfolk could work. It’s closer to us, offers a decent land stop, and doesn’t take us too far off course. But Charleston in South Carolina is another option, but it’s farther south and would add more distance to the overall journey.”

He paused, looking at Clarisse and Annabeth, waiting for their thoughts.

“Norfolk’s shorter in journey time?” Clarisse asked, rubbing her chin thoughtfully before giving a decisive nod. “Then that one.”

Annie cast her a sidelong glance, her expression mildly judgmental, but she said nothing. Instead, she turned her attention to the map, tracing the routes with her fingers, her brows knitting together in thought.

Finally, she spoke. “Norfolk seems to be the most efficient. Charleston adds about 160 nautical miles, so…” She straightened, shrugging lightly. “Norfolk it is.”

“Then that’s where we’ll head,” Luke commented, his tone light as he rolled up his map and slid it back into his bag. “Let’s guide the ship there—”

Before he could finish, Clarisse was already shouting orders, her voice sharp and commanding. Annabeth hissed something under her breath as she moved to join Clarisse, the two of them directing the shade crew.

The spectral soldiers responded immediately, their movements precise. Within moments, the ship was cutting through the water, setting its course.

Luke exhaled in quiet amusement and leaned against the hull, his hands gripping the edge as he let the wind brush against his face. His gaze drifted to the endless expanse of the sea, a frown settling on his lips as his thoughts churned.

Would things change this time? Could they?

He tightened his grip on the railing, determination stirring in his chest. He had to do something—he had to try to play the cards in his hand instead of letting the enemy dictate every move.

His eyes stayed fixed on the horizon, but his mind wandered deeper. *What about the Princess Andromeda? In the books, it had been nearby. But that was me then, too. Now it's Chris and Ethan.*

And then another thought crept in, unbidden. *And my father? What about him? Will he help?*

*Probably not,* Luke admitted bitterly. *He has no reason to.*

Yet, there was something. A subtle shift, like a thread being pulled tight, a faint tug on his senses. Something was changing—he could feel it, even if he couldn't yet name it.

Luke's frown deepened, but he stayed where he was, staring ahead into the vast unknown.

Chapter End Notes

*Mercúrio – Mercury – The Portuguese version, and it kinda sounds like the Latin Mercurius, lol.
1 - Desejo-te boa sorte nesta tua viagem – I wish you good luck on this journey of yours.
2 - Obrigado, Inês. De verdade. – Thank you, Inês. Truly.
3 - Oh, oh, parou aí. – Hey, hey, stop it.

So, more Mercury and Luke moments. Mercury trying to get a date, but alas, Luke is a busy man—now one of the appointed saviors of CHB—so the date has to wait, and Mercury wasn't amused by that, lol. Meanwhile, Luke is slowly getting used to the god—the dichotomy of not caring about Hermes at all but caring very much when Mercury doesn't answer when Luke wants him to, lol.

Also, we now kinda know where Abigail is—she's there somewhere... and Mercury telling Luke to keep the card close—so he always has news of his man, lol.

Dean is going insane over Grover's disappearance. And yeah, Percy only told Annabeth about it, and she told no one. Well, not until after they all got on the ship—then she spilled.

The prayers—all the campers praying for them because Camp is going down the drain, especially after the disaster from the flock chapter and the aftermath… And yeah, Drew

got injured—now she has a scar on her face, and she is not happy about it. But Aphrodite has spoken. Now, what did she mean?

Finally, the ship—same one, because I didn't see a reason to scrap it. Also, because Clarisse is her father's little bloodthirsty machine, and he's proud of her, lol. And yeah, Annie and Clarisse immediately getting into a fight, with Luke having to step in. Like always.

In any case, thank you all for reading! I always appreciate your comments and kudos, and it doesn't matter if you're late to the party! ♥

So, there's a little thing here that'll make Hermes suss something out—and also, that vulture was a nice touch I added. Who knows what it's about?

# Chapter 54: SoM - Sea Travel

Chapter Summary

Adventure at the sea

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Luke was really starting to hate traveling at sea.

First, the way the ship constantly swayed, leaving him feeling as though he were moving even when he was still. His feet belonged on solid ground, not on some floating contraption—whether it was wood, metal, or whatever—bobbing above the water. The endless motion made his stomach churn, nausea creeping in waves that seemed to match the sea.

Not pleasant.

At all.

Second, there was the unfortunate fact of being a demigod. A shining, monster-attracting beacon in the middle of the ocean. Luke leaned over the hull, his face slightly green as he glared down at the water. He could barely make out the shape of something huge below the surface, obscured by the waves. But the way the ship shuddered beneath him confirmed it—whatever it was, it wasn't small.

Great. Another sea monster.

It was the third sea monster since they'd left the shores of Camp Half-Blood, and it was beginning to wear on Luke's nerves. Worse, they weren't even in deep waters yet. They'd kept the ship close to the coast on this first leg of the journey, relying on his internal coordinates to guide them. The plan had been to preserve the ship for open-sea travel and dock soon to restock. Luke had thought—naively, perhaps—that the shallow waters would offer some protection. That the monsters wouldn't be as persistent or their numbers as overwhelming.

Apparently, he was wrong.

"Come on, maggots!" Clarisse's voice cut through the chaos from somewhere behind him. Luke grimaced, leaning farther over the hull to glance at the looming shape beneath the water.

She was definitely enjoying this whole *leader* thing a little too much.

“Round shot!” she bellowed. “Aim for the monster! Let out the cannons!”

Luke shook his head, muttering under his breath as the ship’s deck became a flurry of movement. The spectral crew responded with swift, precise efficiency, carrying out her orders like the well-oiled, undead machine they were.

The ship groaned as the cannons were maneuvered into position, their metallic clanks echoing across the deck. Luke felt the vibration in his chest as he braced himself for the inevitable chaos.

And chaos it was.

Bronze cannonballs fired with a deafening roar, their glinting arcs slicing through the air before crashing into the water with equally thunderous splashes. The force rattled Luke’s already ringing ears, making it hard to tell whether the noise came from the cannons or the water.

The monster groaned—a guttural, bone-deep sound that Luke didn’t just hear but felt vibrating in his chest. It had definitely felt the hit, but instead of retreating, it seemed only angrier now.

The ship lurched violently as the creature struck back, harder this time.

Of course. His life couldn’t be simple.

Luke frowned, his grip on the rail tightening as he scrambled for ideas. He was a swordsman—a good one, in his own not-so-humble opinion—but that skill didn’t help much in a fight that involved cannons and a sea monster using their ship as a toy. The constant rocking made him feel like he was two steps away from losing whatever was left in his stomach. His throat burned as he leaned heavily against the rail, breathing through his mouth to stave off the nausea.

He *definitely* didn’t have sea legs.

And unlike the Luke from the books, he didn’t have winged shoes to harass the creature from the air, making it regret every second of shaking the ship and churning his stomach like a blender.

So, what could he do?

“No, you idiot!” Annabeth shouted. Her hands gripped the mast tightly, her knuckles white as she turned her fury on Clarisse. The daughter of Ares stood perched on a raised wooden platform, spear in hand, looking completely at ease despite the ship's violent rocking. Clarisse had that manic glint in her eye, the kind that said she thrived in this kind of madness. Unlike Luke or Annabeth, she wasn’t fighting to keep her balance—she was reveling in it.

Annabeth’s glare could’ve pierced stone.

“Use the guns—the close-range ones! The carronades! What’s the point of having them if you’re not going to use them? And by the gods, order your useless shades to start shooting!

They have pistols with celestial bronze bullets—make them do something!"

Clarisse didn't take kindly to challenges to her authority.

Not one bit.

"Miss Princess, I am the leader of the quest here! And the cannons are celestial bronze too, genius!"

Annie didn't back down, her tone equally sharp and sulky. "It's still smarter to use close-range weapons! Why waste the cannons when the guns and carronades can do the job just as well?"

Clarisse shot back without hesitation, pointing out the damage cannons could do, and Annie countered with efficiency and tactics. The argument spiraled quickly into a roundabout exchange—neither willing to concede, both fueled by that age-old Athena-versus-Ares rivalry.

Luke had enough.

The ship rocked violently beneath him, his stomach churned, and here they were—arguing like little children.

Frustration simmered to the surface, and he couldn't hold it back anymore.

Balancing himself on the railing, Luke turned around, almost slipping but catching himself with a firm grip, fingers aching from the strain. His glare cut through the chaos.

"Annabeth Chase! Clarisse La Rue!"

Both girls froze, their heated words dying mid-sentence as they turned to him, startled.

"Stop arguing and *do* something!" Luke shouted, his voice sharp with exasperation. His gaze snapped to Clarisse first, making her stiffen under the weight of it. "You, Clarisse—you have an electric spear, right? What's it for? Decoration? Go electrocute that thing under the ship! It's sea water, for God's sake! It conducts electricity! That's a divine weapon—use it!"

Clarisse blinked, then scrambled into action, shouting orders to her spectral crew as she activated her spear, its electric current crackling ominously.

Luke wasn't done.

He turned to Annabeth, who was now trying her best to look innocent.

"And you, Annabeth—you're always bragging about how much you know about navigation and warships. Great! Go help the shades! Cannons, guns, carronades—I don't care! Just make sure they're firing and not standing around like statues!"

Annabeth's cheeks flushed, but she moved swiftly, shoving a shade aside. The spectral man, momentarily stunned by her audacity, shrugged after a beat and moved to another post as she

took control of a close-range gun, loaded celestial bronze bullets, and took aim.

Luke sighed heavily, bracing himself against the rail. At least now they were doing something useful.

And he had found something to do as well.

He approached one of the shades, who blinked at him but didn't protest as Luke plucked a musket from his hands. Shooting wasn't exactly his forte—Luke was a swordsman, not a marksman—but the monster was enormous.

How hard could it be to hit something that big?

Probability was on his side.

*Maybe.*

Squinting, he raised the musket, trying to align it with the serpent's form as best as he could.

In any case, it was something to do. Better than standing there, useless.

The shade beside him murmured instructions, adjusting Luke's posture and guiding his aim. To his surprise, it actually helped. He went from wildly missing the target, splashing harmlessly into the sea, to landing his shots. And now, with each fired round, Luke saw the effect it was having—the creature began shifting, moving away from directly under the ship.

It wasn't just working. It was pushing the beast back.

Then Luke finally saw it for what it was—a sea serpent, rising slowly from the water. Its teeth gleamed, razor-sharp and glinting with menace, while its scales bore the marks of battle, bleeding from countless wounds.

The creature hissed, a guttural sound that echoed through the air and sent chills down Luke's spine.

He swallowed hard, gripping the musket tighter, and fired again.

Bronze projectiles from muskets and cannons rained down on the serpent, hammering it from all sides. The massive creature staggered, its head lifting higher out of the water, looming closer. Its mouth opened, revealing rows of teeth, each one as tall as Luke himself. The ship rocked violently with every wave the serpent stirred, and Luke braced against the rail, steadying himself.

And then—

"Die, you ugly bastard!" Clarisse's voice roared, cutting through the chaos.

She stood near the edge, her electric spear crackling with more power than Luke had ever seen. Sparks danced wildly along its length, casting a harsh light. With a fierce cry, Clarisse lunged, plunging the weapon straight into the serpent's head.

The reaction was immediate.

The serpent reared back, thrashing wildly. Its head jerked upward, nearly taking Clarisse with it. Shades rushed forward, grabbing her just in time and pulling her back to safety. The creature let out a deafening shriek, a sound so piercing and grating that Luke instinctively dropped the musket to cover his ears.

He winced, but his gaze stayed fixed on the monster.

Slowly, its massive form began to dissolve.

Golden dust shimmered in the air, swirling before sinking into the sea. The water grew calm again, the serpent's presence erased as though it had never been there.

Silence fell over the ship, save for the gentle lapping of the waves.

Clarisse's spear hovered for a heartbeat, suspended as if by magic, before it zipped back into her hand. She caught it with ease, standing tall, her chest rising and falling as a small, triumphant smirk curved her lips.

*Huh.* Neat trick. Useful, too. Looked like Ares had given her an upgrade.

He inhaled deeply, leaned down to retrieve the fallen musket, and shoved it back into the shade's arms without so much as a glance. Straightening, he marched toward Clarisse's direction, only for Annabeth to beat him to it.

"Nice trick," Annabeth praised, though her praise seemed a little *too* backhanded.

But Clarisse was too wrapped up in her triumph to bother with another argument.

Small mercies.

"There are too many monsters showing up," Luke said, narrowing his eyes as he glanced toward the sea, where the golden shimmer of the sea serpent's remains danced on the water.

"I'm not sure what's normal for demigod naval navigation, but this is the third one today—and it's not even been a full day. This feels—"

"Way too strange," Annabeth finished, her eyes glinting with that sharp, calculating light she always had when piecing together a puzzle. "I agree. And they're not just any monsters—big ones, like they're deliberately targeting us…"

Luke's jaw tightened as unease settled over him.

And the Princess Andromeda hadn't appeared yet. He didn't even know if it would—if it would be another ship entirely, or if they'd forgo ships altogether.

But his gut told him something wasn't right.

“It doesn’t matter,” Clarisse interjected, her tone dismissive as she propped her spear against her shoulder. “We take down every monster that comes our way.”

“Of course a brute like you would think that,” Annabeth snapped, giving her a sharp, disdainful look.

“Enough, both of you,” Luke said firmly, cutting in before the tension could escalate further. He sighed, dragging a hand through his hair. “Whether this is a coincidence or we’re being targeted, we need to focus on what matters now—like reaching the Norfolk dock.”

He scanned the deck, his eyes following the shades darting back and forth, reloading weapons and tending to repairs. The ship itself showed the toll of the battles, its metal sides dented and battered. “We need to restock and patch this thing up before we head into the Sea of Monsters. That’s our priority.”

Both girls turned to follow his gaze. Annabeth bit her lip, worry flickering across her face, though the calculating glint in her eye told him she was already cataloging the damage and forming a plan. Clarisse, on the other hand, grimaced as she looked at him, her hand tightening around her spear.

“How long until we get there?” Clarisse asked, her voice tense.

Luke tilted his head, letting his internal compass guide him. “We’re close. Just a few more hours, and we’ll be there—probably by late night. Or maybe by early morning.”

Clarisse tightened her grip on her spear, her knuckles whitening before she gave a firm nod. “We defend the ship until then. Once we dock, we figure out how to repair it. Some of the shades here—they specialize in repairs.”

“Yeah,” Luke murmured, his voice distant, his gaze fixed on the horizon. His fingers curled around the seashell Inês had given him, tucked safely in his pocket. His brows furrowed as a thought jolted through him. He glanced down at the shell, trying to recall her exact words.

What had she said again? That it could help?

He stared at the shell, his mind wandering. He remembered how Cabin Ten had offered seashells to Aphrodite before—a prayer, a plea for favor. It had been for the quest, for protection over him and the girls.

But what if... What if they honored her directly? Would that strengthen their chances of gaining her favor? Maybe?

The memory of Drew’s scar flashed in his mind, and he grimaced. Aphrodite might not have given Drew what she wanted, but she had done *something*.

Maybe this was worth a shot.

He made his decision. “Let’s do a ritual. Now. One to the Foam-Born.”

“What?” Annabeth snapped, whipping her head toward him. “To *her*?” Her face twisted in disbelief. “Why not to the Lord of the Sea? You know, considering we’re on the sea and on a ship.”

Luke shot a glance in Clarisse’s direction. She stiffened, her expression closing off, but the tension in her lips betrayed her mood. Annabeth followed his gaze, her own lips pressing together as understanding flickered in her eyes.

The unspoken message between them was clear: Ares fighting Percy hadn’t exactly won Poseidon’s favor. Honoring Poseidon now—while on a ship gifted by Ares, with Clarisse, a daughter of Ares, on board—felt like tempting fate.

The news Luke had seen of ships lost to Poseidon’s storms lingered in his mind, even though logic told him the sea god wouldn’t sabotage them.

Probably.

He wasn’t entirely sure.

But he hoped.

“Let’s honor Genetyllis,” Clarisse announced, her voice firm as she called over one of the shades, barking orders for him to gather what they needed.

Genetyllis. Of birth, the motherly side of the goddess. Of course, Ares Cabin would use that epithet—Cabin Ten too.

Annabeth grimaced but sighed heavily, the sound so grudging that Luke shot her a sharp look. She rolled her eyes in response, but the silent exchange ended when the shade returned, carrying a makeshift altar. He placed it near the center of the deck, close to the commander’s cabin they’d been using for rest.

They stepped forward, Luke clutching the seashell tightly in his hand as Clarisse declared, “I’ll lead. I know it better than you two.”

Luke nodded without complaint, while Annabeth crossed her arms, her expression guarded but watchful.

One by one, they cleansed their hands with seawater. Clarisse lit the incense—a myrrh-scented one, Luke noted—and took a deep breath before facing the makeshift altar. Her voice was firm, the words clearly practiced as she began:

“Aphrodite Euploia, goddess of the gentle waves, born from the foam of the endless sea, hear my call and grant your favor, guide us safely through your waters.”

She turned to Luke with a sharp look, signaling him to step forward.

Luke stepped forward, hesitating briefly. Should he offer this? It was Inês’s gift, something from her home. But his gut urged him on, and after a moment’s pause, he placed the shimmering seashell onto the altar. His voice was soft but resolute as he spoke:

“I offer this symbol of your beauty and power. May it please you and draw your blessings.”

Clarisse nodded, pouring a libation into a bowl as she continued the prayer:

“Accept this offering, O goddess of fair voyages, may your grace ensure calm seas and safe passage. Let your love and power shield me from harm. Bless my voyage with peace and safety.”

She took a slow, deep breath, her eyes closing briefly in concentration. When she opened them again, her voice carried the weight of finality as she finished the ritual:

“Aphrodite of fair voyages, your blessings bring safety and peace. We thank you for your guidance and protection.”

They lingered there, unsure, waiting for something—some sign. And then—

A screech tore through the air.

Luke grimaced, looking up as the noise grew louder. It seemed their sign had come, but not the one they’d hoped for. Harpies, of course. The feathered pests were everywhere. But worse still, wind spirits swirled alongside them, storm-like forms racing toward the ship with violent intent.

“Of course, this is her protection,” Annabeth muttered snidely, crossing her arms.

Luke shot her a sharp look. “Quiet.”

That tongue of hers—talking back to him was one thing, but this attitude toward a god? And in the middle of the sea, no less? He narrowed his eyes.

“Mind your lack of respect,” Luke warned sternly, his eyes never leaving the approaching threat.

Shades darted back and forth across the deck, reloading weapons and scrambling to follow the sharp commands Clarisse barked between attacks. She jabbed her spear into the air, the electricity crackling and sparking with each strike. Whenever she managed to land a hit on one of the wind spirits, they hissed and recoiled, but they were quick—agile, cursed things that twisted and darted, refusing to stay still long enough for anyone to land a clean blow.

Annabeth moved like a shadow, her dagger flashing in the fray. She slipped in and out of danger, her feet never stopping, her strikes methodical. Her movements were precise, like she was solving a puzzle even in the heat of battle.

And Luke—

He was everywhere.

His sword caught the light as he scaled walls, the mast, any surface that gave him a vantage point to leap from. He moved with the ease of someone who’d done this a thousand times before, and that childish part of his mind—tucked away but still alive—couldn’t help but

think it felt kind of like Naruto, or maybe Assassin's Creed. The thought flickered through his head, making him smile just a little as he twisted his torso mid-air, striking around him and cutting cleanly as he fell.

One spirit, two, three—each fell to his blade, their death cries echoing like the eerie howl of wind through a narrow tunnel.

He hit the deck in a roll, barely pausing before launching himself back into action, repeating the relentless rhythm: up, slash, land, repeat.

And then, as suddenly as it began, it was over.

The monsters were gone, their remains scattered across the deck as golden dust that glittered faintly in the dim light. The ship bore the evidence of the battle—deep slashes in the metal, feathers scattered like debris, and patches of charred wood from the sparks of Clarisse's spear.

They stood there, breathing hard, the adrenaline fading, leaving only the aching exhaustion of bodies pushed to their limits.

Luke dragged a hand across his face, wiping the dust from his eyes, and sighed, resting one hand on his waist as he tried to catch his breath.

The deck was silent except for their ragged breathing. Calm, somewhat.

This was getting ridiculous. Too many monsters, nonstop. They couldn't keep this up—not like this.

But… maybe there was something he could try. He placed a hand to his chin, his mind racing. A barrier. A boundary. He'd managed it before—barely—on that day with Percy and the water. Sure, it had only protected himself, nothing as large as an entire ship, but…

Maybe he could try.

If he focused, maybe he could center it on the captain's cabin, at least for now. Let the girls rest a little while he worked. And if he pushed himself further, just maybe, he could expand it to cover the whole ship.

It was risky. But this wasn't just about effort—it was survival.

He had to try.

"Girls," he said, turning to face them with a faint smile. "Go rest."

Annabeth frowned, furrowing her brows. "But what about you?"

He shrugged, trying to sound casual. "I'll sit by the door, rest there but keep an eye on the sky. You know, just in case."

“Paranoid,” Clarisse muttered, but she gave him a long, searching look, her lips pressed into a tight line. Luke held her gaze, letting his smile linger until she relented with a curt nod. She looked exhausted.

Once they were inside the cabin, Luke slid down to sit by the door, the altar a few feet away. The seashell still glinted in the sunlight, a sharp, persistent reminder. He glanced at it briefly before focusing, settling his hands on his thighs.

That energy inside—it stirred at his call, familiar now, rising to the surface. He guided it over his skin with ease, but the real challenge began when he tried to push it further.

It resisted.

Luke gritted his teeth, dragging the energy outward. It felt like trying to stretch himself too thin, like pulling a rope against a weight that didn’t want to move. The strain spread through his chest, each breath growing heavier as he pushed harder.

The ship groaned beneath him, and he grimaced, his fingers digging into his legs. The energy bucked and twisted, wild and stubborn, but Luke didn’t stop. He kept pulling, kept forcing it to expand, until something inside him gave way.

A snap.

The energy surged, rushing outward in a wave so strong it knocked the breath from his lungs. It spilled across the ship, wrapping around every part of it, but it was too much, too fast, slipping out of his grasp.

Luke clenched his jaw, sweat dripping down his face as he wrestled it into shape. His whole body shook with the effort, his vision spotting, but after a few agonizing moments, the barrier finally settled.

It shimmered faintly, covering the entire ship.

Luke collapsed back against the doorframe, trembling. His hands clenched his thighs tightly, nails digging through the fabric of his sweatpants. His breath was harsh and uneven, his chest rising and falling like he’d just run a marathon. He felt... hollow, like everything had been drained out of him, yet heavy, as if the weight of the barrier was pressing down on him from all sides.

The sensation clawed at him—like drowning, like the ocean swallowing him whole, crushing him with its depth. He felt untethered, floating in a void with no anchor, and yet every nerve screamed that he couldn’t let go.

His jaw tightened as he glared at the sky, nausea rolling in his stomach. He didn’t move, didn’t waver, even as his body begged him to stop.

He held the boundary.

Every second felt like an eternity, but he stayed there, locked in place, muscles taut as he clung to his focus.

This was survival, and he wasn't letting go.

Minute by agonizing minute slipped past, but Luke barely registered them, his focus narrowed entirely on his breathing, on holding himself steady, on staying conscious.

When he came back to himself, a hand pressed firmly on his shoulder.

The light was shining now, where only moments ago it had been dark. He blinked sluggishly, exhaustion weighing down his vision, his breaths shallow and uneven.

But before he let the boundary fade, he checked—his mind sluggish but determined. His gaze swept the horizon, and his internal compass pointed to their destination.

When he finally realized they were practically there, relief swept over him like a wave.

He let the barrier drop with a long, shuddering sigh, his body slumping forward as if every ounce of strength had been wrung out of him. He was so, so tired—the kind of exhaustion that made his limbs feel like lead and his head far too heavy to lift.

"Luke."

Annabeth's voice cut through the haze, pulling his attention. He blinked, trying to clear his vision, and looked up to see her staring down at him. Her hand rested firmly on his shoulder, her face etched with worry, her brows furrowed.

His gaze flicked to the side, catching sight of Clarisse behind her, arms crossed, attempting to look indifferent. But the concern she tried to hide was still there, plain enough to see.

"I'm fine," he managed, his voice barely above a breath, before they could speak. He sucked in another breath. "Just... give me a moment. I'm fine."

Then he pushed himself to his feet. His legs were numb, unsteady beneath him, but somehow, he managed to stand.

Luke tried to muster a reassuring smile, though it didn't seem to convince them. Still, he pressed on, shifting the focus to what mattered. "We've practically arrived. So... now what?"

"We need supplies," Annabeth said, her tone heavy with reluctance. She narrowed her eyes at Luke, like she was about to say something else, but instead, she just shook her head. "Restock, materials for the ship…"

"Yeah, repairs," Clarisse muttered, her gaze shifting to the hull. Her grimace deepened as she took in the state of it—the dents, the scratches, the damage that looked like it had barely survived the last battle. "We need that badly." Her voice dipped into something softer, barely above a whisper. "The ship Dad gave me…"

Luke's eyes flicked to her, and he tried to steer them back on track. "Well, you said there were shades here who could handle the repairs, right?"

Clarisse nodded sharply, but her jaw was tight.

“Then I think we’ll be fine,” Luke said, trying to sound sure of it, though he was anything but.

“Maybe,” Annabeth replied, doubt flickering in her eyes. “But we haven’t even hit the deep water yet…”

Luke pressed his lips together. Clarisse winced, the tension in the air thickening as they all avoided saying what they were thinking.

They all knew it. This ship wasn’t made for those waters—not for the Sea of Monsters. If the onslaught of monsters kept up at this pace—and who was he kidding? With his luck, it’d only get worse; it was *called* the Sea of Monsters for a reason—the ship wouldn’t hold.

And then…

They wouldn’t just be screwed. They’d be monumentally, epically fucked.

But Luke had to think positively—focus on the now, on what they could do instead of spiraling.

“We’re getting close to the dock, so how about this?” Luke said, forcing himself to take a steadying breath before attempting a smile. If he was honest, it felt more like a grimace. “We stay on the dock, sleep, rest, and then by late afternoon, we head out to get the supplies.”

Annabeth’s sharp gaze flicked over him, head to toe, cataloging everything.

“Yes,” she said with no hesitation, her tone leaving no room for argument. “Rest is important. We need to gather our strength.”

Clarisse nodded. “Very important. Maybe we—you know, since we’re rested more—could handle that part. We’re not useless.”

“Yeah,” Annabeth agreed, a little too eagerly.

For once, they were agreeing on something, Luke thought with a quiet snort—and, naturally, it was to gang up on him.

“Alas,” he said with a dramatic sigh, resting a finger on his cheek and tilting his head as if pondering some great tragedy. His eyes glinted with humor despite how drained he felt. “I’ll go out too, brats. It’s a long time until night, and besides, I don’t trust you two alone.”

“I’m responsible!” Annabeth shot back immediately, falling right into the trap.

“I don’t need a babysitter,” Clarisse added with a huff, her arms crossing in defiance.

Ah, children. Luke smirked faintly. Sometimes it was just too easy.

“Are you?” he asked, feigning doubt, his tone light and teasing.

“Yes,” Annabeth said firmly, her chin lifting. “We can split up and get everything we need. That way, we cover more ground and save time.”

“Yeah,” Clarisse agreed, tossing a glare at Annabeth. “And I don’t need Miss Smarty-Pants telling me what to do.”

“You—”

“Okay, then,” Luke cut in, clapping his hands to halt the inevitable argument before it could snowball. “It’s decided. We all go out late afternoon, split up, and meet back here at the dock when the sky starts getting dark.”

Annabeth blinked, momentarily startled. Then her eyes narrowed, suspicion flashing across her face. She made a face, sighed deeply, and crossed her arms, wearing the look of someone who thought the universe had conspired to annoy her.

Poor dear—she’d figured out, far too late, that she’d been outmaneuvered.

And she hated it, which, in Luke’s opinion, made the whole thing kind of funny.

“Fine by me,” she muttered begrudgingly.

Clarisse shrugged, clearly not as bothered.

“Good. Then you two handle whatever you want. I’m going to rest,” Luke said, turning away.

He made it a few steps before pausing, casting a sharp look over his shoulder, his tone stern—just the right amount to make sure they got the message. “And the ship better look exactly the way I left it when I come back. No fights. Got it?”

He didn’t wait for a response, though the groans behind him made it clear they’d heard him loud and clear—the kind of exaggerated, theatrical noises only brats could muster.

“Sure,” Annabeth muttered under her breath, her tone dripping with sarcasm. “I’m not a kid, though. Or stupid.”

“Whatever,” Clarisse huffed, her voice no more sincere than Annabeth’s.

As he walked away, Luke caught snippets of their grumbling—something about ‘bossy’ and ‘I’m not a child’—but he let it go.

*Brats.*

The cabin door creaked open, and the moment he stepped inside, his body surrendered completely. He didn’t even bother aiming for the cot; the first vaguely soft surface he hit—probably a pile of supplies or someone’s, most likely Clarisse’s, forgotten jacket—was good enough.

He collapsed into it, the discomfort barely registering in his exhaustion-heavy mind.

The next thing he knew, he was out cold.

Chapter End Notes

Now the trio is at sea. Clarisse is commanding her fleet, Annabeth has her opinions, and yet both of them listen to Luke, lol.

Yeah, Poseidon has beef with Ares and, therefore, with all his spawn. So, praying to Aphrodite it is—let's see if all those prayers will actually do something…

And Luke's powers! He's developing them, though they still take a lot out of him. But hey, he did it!

In any case, thank you for reading! I always appreciate the kudos and comments—no matter if you're late to the party.

So, do you guys think Percy will find a way to invade the quest?

And next chapter will be exciting… someone we all love will appear.

I'll answer the previous comments when I have the time! I promise!

# Chapter 55: SoM - The God I Call Father

Chapter Summary

> Luke and the girls finally arrive at their destination. With a new problem to fix (their ship), they split up to look for supplies. It seems peaceful enough, but, alas, Luke soon feels a presence following him...
>
> Or: Hermes has finally lost his grip on sanity

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Remember," Luke started, turning back with his hands on his hips, fixing the two girls with a pointed look. "We head back when it gets dark. Then we do repairs—"

"The shades do the repairs. They don't need to sleep," Clarisse cut in, her arms crossed, surprisingly without her spear for once.

"Yes, yes, thank you, Clarisse," Luke said blandly, his tone so flat it made her roll her eyes. "The *shades* handle the repairs, and after that, we set sail. Straight to the Sea of Monsters. No more stops. So whatever we need—or want—you get it now. This is the only chance. You have your lists, so prioritize. And if, by some miracle, you see something small you really want, fine, you can get it. But—"

He paused, meeting their gazes one at a time before raising a finger. "Don't blow all the money. We—"

"We might need it for emergencies. Basic money-handling," Annabeth interrupted, her voice sharp, carrying that *I already know this, why are you even saying it?* tone. Her hair was neatly pulled into the braided bun he'd done for her earlier—she'd asked, and he'd just done it without much thought.

Clarisse, by contrast, had her hair in a lazy ponytail, as if that was all the effort it deserved.

Annabeth glared at him, her expression practically screaming that he was nagging. She clearly wanted to shut him up and leave already.

The audacity.

Luke sighed. "Since that's all clear, then let's go."

The girls' eyes lit up, and they practically bolted before he cleared his throat, very pointedly. They stopped in their tracks, glaring back at him, clearly reluctant, which made Luke arch a

brow.

"Be careful. If anything seems strange—"

"We'll search for each other or you, and go back to the ship straight away," they recited in unison, their tone just this side of mocking.

"Okay, then." Luke breathed in, letting out a long sigh, feeling every bit like a mom wrangling two rebellious teenagers. Was this how it normally was? How did Chiron even deal with it?

"Let's go," he said, resigned.

The girls bolted without so much as a glance back, heading off in opposite directions. Luke stayed behind, shaking his head in exasperation.

Children.

With another sigh, Luke started walking, his eyes wandering over the Norfolk dock.

The wooden piers stretched over the water, their planks faded and creaky. Crates sat stacked in uneven piles, some orderly, others looking like they might topple at any second, while workers bustled about, hauling things, shouting to each other, tying off ropes.

The air smelled like saltwater and fish—strong, but not overwhelming—and every so often, a breeze from the sea carried cut through the heavier scents, offering his nose a much-needed reprieve. Small boats bobbed gently in the water, paint peeling off their sides, while the bigger ships loomed behind them, their sails flapping lightly in the wind.

Among them was their own battered ship.

Luke glanced over his shoulder, catching sight of a couple walking past. Their eyes flickered toward the ship for a moment before sliding away, like something else had suddenly captured their interest.

Nobody spared it a second glance.

The Mist, as always, hid the ship, ensuring people saw only what they wanted to see.

His gaze lingered briefly, then he kept walking, shaking the thought off.

The dock was alive in the late afternoon.

People hurried home, finishing errands, while others lingered, strolling around like they had nowhere else to be. Kids ran past, sticky-fingered and loud, their parents trailing after them, distracted by their own chatter or shopping bags. Somewhere nearby, someone was playing a fiddle—a lively tune that almost got drowned out by the hum of conversation, the occasional clatter of crates, and the squawk of gulls circling above.

The shops along the waterfront weren't much to look at.

Most of the shops were plain, practical places that catered to sailors, their signs advertising ropes, tools, and other necessities. Luke caught a glimpse of Annabeth's familiar blonde head as she ducked into one of them, and his lips twitched up briefly despite himself.

But there were others, smaller and more colorful, filled with trinkets and oddities—carved wooden figures, maps that looked old but probably weren't. Food stalls dotted the area too, their smoky smells drifting over the dock—grilled fish, fried something-or-other, and spices that made his stomach grumble despite himself.

Luke moved through the crowd with ease, blending in as if it were second nature. His gaze drifted over the shops and stalls, and a few things caught his eye but nothing made him stop.

His hand dipped into his pocket, pulling out the crumpled list. He straightened it with a small frown, scanning the items he'd been assigned. Repairs. Of course, it made sense for him to handle it—he was an actual adult and far less suspicious than two bratty teenage girls trying to buy—he squinted at the paper—tar and rivets.

The shade's handwriting was atrocious.

He read through the list again, glancing up every now and then as he walked, eyes scanning the storefronts.

Where were the shops that sold this kind of thing? And, more importantly, would they even have supplies for a ship from the American Civil War? Luke squinted, the thought making him sigh again. Whatever. He'd try. If he couldn't find what they needed, then… well, they were screwed.

But he had to think positive.

*Positive,* he repeated to himself, scratching his head as he tried to decipher another smudged word on the list. His eyes scanned the area, searching for anything that looked remotely promising.

Then—

The hairs on the back of his neck stood.

Luke didn't pause, didn't falter in his steps. He kept moving, his hand brushing through his hair, nails imperceptibly digging into his scalp as he pretended to read the list in his hand. His eyes scanned the surroundings from the corner of his vision, his breathing steady, *controlled.*

A shadow moved on his periphery—a person, maybe, or something else. He couldn't rule out the possibility. His instincts screamed at him, tightening the knot of unease in his chest.

Whatever it was, it was keeping pace with him.

*He was being followed.*

Internally cursing, he forced himself to pass a hand through his hair, feigning nonchalance as his jaw clenched tight. If it was a monster, here of all places, what about the girls?

Were they safe?

His jaw clenched tighter.

He should have insisted they stick together, should have fought harder against their arguments about time and practicality. But he hadn't. He'd let them go. And now—

Luke folded the list, shoving it into his pocket with casual ease, his eyes fixed ahead even as he tried to catch glimpses from his peripheral vision. His hands slipped into his pockets, the picture of calm, as he stopped by a store window. He leaned slightly, pretending to study the display while his eyes focused on the glass, searching for a reflection.

Then he saw it.

His breath caught.

Luke turned slowly, his heart frozen mid-beat, every muscle in his body screaming to run, though his feet felt like they were cemented to the ground.

There he was.

Across the street, the crowd moved between them like a blur, leaning against a wall as if he had all the time in the world. His shirt hung open, his jeans rumpled, flip-flops on his feet, and a hat tilted just enough to cast a shadow over his face.

But those eyes—sharp, glowing blue, cutting through the chaos like knives—were locked onto him.

The air suddenly seemed to weigh as much as tons, pressing down on him with an almost physical force. The background noise of the crowd dulled to a distant hum, muffled and far away, as though the world itself had shrunk, leaving only him and his father.

Luke's skin prickled, his heartbeat pounding in his ears like a drumbeat of panic. It felt as if the hunter had found its prey—and this hunter was angry.

Hermes.

Here.

For a moment, Luke couldn't move, couldn't think. His blood turned to ice, freezing in his veins as dread coiled tight around his chest, squeezing harder and harder until it felt like he couldn't breathe. His mind blanked, wiped clean of all thought under the pressure.

His skin crawled, every nerve screaming louder and louder, until a single word hammered in his head.

*Run.*

Luke bolted.

He pushed through the crowd, crashing into people one after the other, curses and shouts of surprise flying around him. He cursed internally too, frustration bubbling at how much they slowed him down. His skin itched, that chant of *run, run, run* pounding in his mind, loud and irrational, drowning out everything else.

Behind him, he heard it—the sound of steps, unhurried, cutting through the chaos like it wasn't even there. He felt it too, the way the crowd shifted, parting as though guided by some invisible force.

Luke didn't want to look. He *shouldn't* look—it would only slow him down—but he couldn't stop himself.

His head turned, just enough to catch a glimpse over his shoulder.

And there he was.

His father, walking like he had all the time in the world, hands tucked into his pockets. The people around him moved aside, clearing a path without even realizing it, like something unseen pulled them away.

Luke cursed under his breath, his heart pounding like it was trying to escape his chest. Panic twisted inside him as he pivoted sharply, breaking away from the crowd. He couldn't stay here—it was slowing him down too much.

He pushed harder, his thighs burning as he picked up speed, faster and faster, until the world around him blurred and tunneled. He poured everything he had into running, more than he'd ever pushed himself before, but—

But he heard it.

The sound of running behind him, steady, and somehow still keeping pace.

Luke's eyes darted frantically, scanning the area for something—some place to hide, some corner to duck into, anything that could give him an edge.

He didn't care where, he just needed to get away.

With every step, the feeling clawed deeper into him, heavy and suffocating. *He felt like prey.*

Then it happened—a sudden rush of air, fast and sharp, too close. Luke moved on instinct, throwing himself aside, barely dodging as something brushed his collar. A hand. His father's hand.

Hermes barreled past him, those piercing, glowing eyes locked on him, tracking every movement even as he didn't stop.

Luke's breath hitched, and he moved again, faster, harder, trying to put any kind of distance between them. But it didn't matter. Hermes rushed at him again, faster and faster, an inhuman speed that made Luke's chest tighten with dread.

No one else had ever moved like this. Not anyone Luke had fought, not even himself on his best day. And his father was only getting faster, pushing Luke to his limits.

He could barely keep up.

Luke twisted, dodged, threw himself out of the way over and over, sharp turns into narrower streets, darting through places with fewer people, sprinting with everything he had.

But it wasn't enough.

Every turn he made, Hermes was there. Every path he chose, those glowing eyes stayed close, a shadow at his heels.

Until—

Luke's heart dropped as he saw it too late.

A dead end.

He couldn't stop in time, barreling straight into the wall with a painful thud. The impact rattled through him, forcing a sharp hiss between his teeth. He stumbled back, his chest heaving, panic spiraling in his mind as he turned around.

There was nowhere left to run.

Still, he forced himself to shove the fear down, locking his muscles as he glared, breathing hard and uneven.

And—and his father was completely normal. Not a drop of sweat, not even the faintest sign of exertion. Hermes stood there, looking down at him, face blank, neutral, as though the chase had been nothing more than a casual stroll.

For a moment, they stood in silence, staring at each other, mortal eyes locked with immortal ones. Luke's breath hitched as Hermes moved closer, instinct kicking in as he stepped back—only for his spine to meet the wall. His jaw tightened, trapping the fear clawing to escape.

He looked up through his lashes as Hermes stopped just inches away, blocking any chance of escape.

Luke was trapped.

"You disobeyed me," the god said, his tone serious, sharp enough to cut.

But his eyes...

The glint in them wasn't human. It burned with something otherworldly, something intent, something that made Luke's gut scream that it meant nothing good.

"Disobey?" Luke dared, the word sharp and bitter on his tongue, his voice stronger than he felt. Fear clawed at his chest, but anger rose to meet it. "What was my imagined crime? Not

offering you the best cut of steak, Hermes Deilakrion, the wretched flesh-eater?"

Hermes' eyes flashed, a blinding blue that cut through the air like lightning. It lasted only a second, but it was enough to make Luke's chest tighten with instant regret.

Then the glow dimmed to something more manageable, and Hermes continued as though Luke hadn't spoken.

"Leaving Camp Half-Blood, when I distinctly told you not to," the god said, his tone cold and cutting. "I even sent a letter. The only exception was for visits to your grandmother's house. You agreed. You told me—you *told me*—you wouldn't leave Camp Half-Blood for the time being, the last time we saw each other."

Hermes' eyes narrowed, his presence looming over Luke like a shadow. "And yet, here you are. Out. Disobeying me."

Luke's eyes widened, his brows furrowing as he stared at his father, the words sinking in with growing disbelief.

Was he hearing this right?

An order from years ago, back when he was still just a teenager? Hermes had barely spoken to him after that, silence stretching between them for years. And now—*now*—his father thought that rule still applied? After almost six years?

A sharp, incredulous laugh burst out of Luke before he could stop it. "That was years ago, Dad. I'm twenty—almost twenty-one. I could've left Camp Half-Blood to live my life ages ago. I'm an adult. I'm *not* a kid anymore."

Hermes' eyes flared, the glow intensifying, too bright, too much.

His presence closed in, towering over Luke, blotting out the light. Around them, the world shifted—the shadows stretched and grew, unnatural, creeping closer, like they had a will of their own. The air grew colder, heavier, pressing down on him, suffocating. It felt like invisible knives cutting into him from all sides.

His father's aura.

Uncontrolled.

It was everywhere, pressing against his skin, reaching for him, curling around him like cold, burning tendrils. They clawed at him, sharp and invasive, like they wanted to sink in, to pull him under.

Hermes' face blurred in the dim light, half-hidden by the encroaching shadows. His features flickered, clear one moment, indistinct the next, like the world itself couldn't quite hold him.

*Crazed blue eyes glowing in the dark.*

Luke trembled, his body curling in on itself despite his best efforts, every instinct screaming at him as the weight of his father's presence bore down, heavy and suffocating.

"You went out," Hermes said, his voice soft but biting, his glowing eyes fixed on Luke as though he were dissecting him. "On a quest. One to the Sea of Monsters."

He straightened slightly, but his frame still dominated the space, as if the very air bent to him, leaving no room for escape. "And I only found out because of the prayers. *Travis'* prayers. Asking me to bless you on this quest. Then the cabin's ritual—honoring me, invoking my name to keep you safe."

His lips twisted, curling into something that wasn't quite a snarl, wasn't quite a smile. It made him look almost... hurt.

"And you weren't there."

The words hung in the air, accusing.

Anger surged in Luke's chest, a wave of frustration and bitterness that he'd buried so many times before. All that hurt he'd swallowed back, all the things he never said because angering a god was never a good idea—no matter how friendly they pretended to be. A god was still a god, and hating them outright was exhausting.

But something ugly snapped inside him.

"And you did your part?" Luke shot back, the words spilling out, sharp and venomous. His scowl deepened as he leaned forward, the rawness in him bubbling to the surface.

He was snarling now, meeting his father's glowing gaze head-on.

"You never do," he spat, his voice shaking but fierce. "So why the hell should I bother with this fucking *joke* of a patronage?"

Hermes' hand shot out, his fingers clamping tightly around the side of Luke's neck, pressing firmly against the frantic beat of his pulse.

Luke tensed, his breath hitching as Hermes leaned in close, their foreheads nearly touching. His father's glowing eyes were wide, unblinking, a manic intensity burning in them. He looked unhinged, like a predator moments from the kill.

And yet, despite the fear clawing at him, Luke glared back, refusing to back down.

"I'm your patron, boy," Hermes said, his voice soft, almost too calm—but there was a dangerous edge beneath it, something cold and sharp that made Luke's stomach twist.

The pressure of Hermes' fingers increased, not enough to cause pain, but enough to remind Luke just how easily he could.

The god's eyes narrowed, the glow flaring brighter, and his tone turned razor-sharp, crackling with anger barely restrained.

“I’m your *father*.”

“Then you’re doing a great job at it,” the words slipped from Luke’s mouth before he could stop them. And now that they had, the rest followed, spilling out like a flood he couldn’t control.

“Silence. Every time I need you. Not once do you grant me what I ask for. Abigail disappeared, and you never even bothered to express concern, didn’t tell me—”

He cut himself off.

Hermes' eyes narrowed.

Then Luke laughed. Sharp. Bitter. The sound *raw*, too real, too honest.

“If I’d had a choice in this patronage—before you, before that *fucking* deal you shoved down my throat—I’d have picked another god.”

His breath came ragged, his voice steady but cutting as he stared Hermes down.

“Anyone but *you*.”

Silence followed.

Heavy.

Hermes leaned back, his face unreadable, a mask Luke couldn’t decipher.

Luke didn’t look away, too angry, too scared. His heart pounded like a war drum, loud in his ears.

Then Hermes moved.

Slow, deliberate, terrifyingly calm. His hand extended, and Luke’s breath caught as he saw what appeared in it.

*The paper.*

The New Rome University pamphlet.

Luke’s blood ran ice-cold. His entire body stiffened as the god glanced at the pamphlet, his expression eerily calm, detached in a way that felt far more dangerous than rage.

“And are you searching for that patron somewhere else?” Hermes asked, his voice even, almost conversational.

Luke’s tongue wouldn’t work. He just stared, his blood frozen, his face pale as his eyes locked on the paper in Hermes’ hand.

*How?*

*How?*

*How?*

He hadn't been careful enough.

"How long, Luke?" Hermes asked, his voice calm but razor-sharp, slicing through the silence.

Luke's eyes flicked up reluctantly, meeting his father's gaze. The glow of Hermes' eyes bore into him, unyielding, demanding. Luke's lips parted, then closed again, useless. No words came.

His mind raced, scrambling for something—anything—but came up blank.

*He was screwed.*

This was the worst-case scenario.

"Luke Castellan," Hermes said, his voice low, like a blade suspended above Luke's neck. "Answer me."

"Around a year," Luke blurted out before he could stop himself.

The moment they left his mouth, he flinched.

His father's aura lashed out, expanding in an instant. The lights in the street flickered, dimming and sputtering, as if the very air had turned hostile. The sounds of animals and the faint hum of the city fell silent, swallowed whole by an oppressive quiet. The shadows stretched and deepened, crawling closer.

Luke felt like he was suffocating.

It wasn't just clawing at him anymore. Now, it felt like hooks sinking into his skin, dragging him down, pressing against him from all sides. The pressure was unbearable, his breath coming in short, ragged gasps. His eyes widened, his body trembling as he fought the weight of it.

Then—

Hermes' hand shot out.

Luke felt the rush of air next to his head, the faint brush of dust settling on his shoulder, and then the sound.

A crack, sharp and loud, reverberated in the silence.

His head turned, just barely, enough to see the splintered wall behind him.

*Hermes' hand had cracked the wall.*

His eyes moved, wary, to stare at the god.

His father looked crazed, his eyes glowing like supernovas, burning too bright, too wild. Shadows carved sharp lines across his face, accentuating the snarl that twisted his features.

It wasn't human—it was beastly, raw, something primal and feral.

The air around him felt charged with unpredictability, radiating an aura of cunning and malice, of hidden blades and dark intent.

Everything—*everything*—about him pressed in, the weight of his being saturating the air. Luke couldn't move, couldn't look away. The god's presence was everywhere, crushing him from all sides.

Hermes' eyes flared, glowing brighter, like twin supernovas burning too fiercely to contain. His words tumbled out in a rapid, fevered rush, something malicious simmering behind them, punctuated by a sharp, bitter laugh.

"You dare defy a god?"

Then, just as suddenly, his tone shifted, the mood changing so abruptly it gave Luke whiplash.

"But you never listen."

Hermes' eyes went wilder, the glow intensifying, his voice rising as something unhinged clawed its way to the surface.

"You don't appreciate what I do! You gave it away. My gift. A gift meant for you, *for you!*"

His tone cracked, each word dripping with venom, cutting into the air like blades.

"You never even used it," he snarled, his voice jagged, raw, barely human. "Something unique. Something meant to *protect you!* And now—you!"

Hermes' hand slammed into the wall beside Luke's head with another deafening crack, the force sending fresh fractures spidering across the surface. Luke flinched, his shoulders tensing, his breath catching in his throat as the god's presence rippled outward. It filled the space, choking the air around them.

"Now you meet with that *Romaoi*," Hermes spat, his voice booming, echoing with divine fury. The weight of his words shook the very ground beneath them. "Thinking of *turning away*? Of *leaving* me? Of stepping into *his* territory?"

Then he laughed.

Crazed.

"Of course, he told you! *Anything* to seem like he's better—sweet words, information he thinks he understands. Not the *full* truth. Never the *full* truth. Just fragments, *guesses*.

Things he watches but never *sees*, spying on me, *pretending* he knows more than he does. Just enough to earn your favor—"

He cut himself off.

Silence dropped between them, broken only by the sound of harsh, labored breathing. Luke was frozen, terror gripping him so tightly he could barely move. His shoulders rose to meet his ears as he curled in on himself, trembling fingers clenching the edges of his shirt.

He wanted to disappear. To hide under his blankets like a kid and pretend none of this was happening.

Then—

"Maybe I should just take you away," Hermes hissed, his voice trembling with something raw and unstable, teetering on the edge of madness. "Take you far—far from all of this. Far away, where those vultures can't reach you. Somewhere safe. Somewhere *Greek.* Somewhere you can't be rebellious anymore."

What?

No. *No, no, no.* This couldn't be happening.

Luke's breath hitched, his thoughts racing, panic clawing at his chest.

His father was going *crazy*.

Still, he tried, his voice weak and shaky, "Dad, the rules. No god can interfere in ongoing quests—"

"You are *different,*" Hermes interrupted, his tone manic, his hand sliding down the wall to clamp tightly around Luke's arm.

The grip made Luke wince, pain radiating through his arm.

"I can act. With *you,* I can," his father said, his voice dropping into something unsettling, something far too raw, too certain.

The grip tightened even more, and Luke hissed in pain, his mind scrambling for a way out. Then he remembered—Mercury's words. *Keep the card close. Always.*

Could… could calling him work?

It would make Hermes angrier. Luke hesitated, heart pounding, but—

But his father was trying to kidnap him. To keep him somewhere. To take him away.

*Scary.*

Luke was terrified.

His free hand shot into his pocket, trembling as he felt for the card. His father's voice continued, but Luke blocked it out, his fingers curling around the edge of the card as he pulled it out.

The moment the card was visible, Hermes froze, cutting himself off mid-sentence. His eyes locked onto it, unblinking, and his entire body went still.

Then his face twisted, something *inhuman* surfacing in his expression. His snarl grew sharper, more beastly, and his features contorted, less like a man, more like a predator.

"You—"

Luke didn't let him finish.

"Mercurius Alipes, guardian of travelers, come to me now in my time of need."

It was immediate.

Hermes' hand shot out, clawing for the card in Luke's grip, but then he froze mid-motion.

His body seized as a guttural, pained sound tore from his throat. His face contorted, twisting further into something unrecognizable, and he doubled over, his hands slamming into the wall behind Luke with enough force to make the surface crack. Again.

His head dropped, so close it almost rested on Luke's shoulder, trapping him even more. His breath came harsh, seething against Luke's neck as the space around them seemed to pulse with unstable energy.

Then—

Then he changed.

The shift wasn't smooth; it was violent, disjointed, like his very being was fighting itself.

The half-unbuttoned shirt shimmered and vanished, replaced by a turtleneck that clung to his frame, and a trench coat. The snarling, feral expression on his face faltered, melting into something else—a grimace, pained and strained, as if it was tearing him apart.

*Hermes was gone.*

Mercury straightened slowly, his body still hunched, trembling with the effort. He winced, his movements jerky, and for a moment, Luke's vision blurred—he saw double.

Hermes' face flickered into view, wild and snarling, cutting through Mercury's features like a cracked mask. One side was Hermes—chaotic, furious—while the other remained Mercury—stern, rigid.

The two didn't blend. They didn't merge. They *clashed*, battling for dominance.

Then, with a visible effort, Mercury forced Hermes back. His teeth clenched, his eyes narrowing as he wrestled to remain in control. The struggle was palpable, visible in every strained line of his body, as if the very act of existing here was a battle he was barely winning.

Mercury's glowing silver eyes locked onto Luke's.

His hand clamped down on Luke's shoulder, firm but not painful, the grip grounding Luke. Mercury's expression was taut, his jaw tight, but his voice came through, cutting through the suffocating air like a lifeline.

"*Run.*"

Luke didn't hesitate.

He ran.

Just ran.

The world around him blurred as his legs pumped, his muscles burning, but he couldn't stop.

He wouldn't.

His ears rang with the curses hurled behind him, the words sharp and biting in ancient Greek, then Latin, the languages switching seamlessly. Crashes followed—the sound of something slamming into walls, objects shattering, footsteps growing louder, closer.

He tried to block it out, to focus on running, but it was impossible.

His breaths came fast and shallow, each one harder than the last, but fear propelled him forward.

Luke's eyes darted, wild and desperate, scanning the narrow streets and alleys for something —*anything*—that could offer him a chance to escape. His thoughts were scattered, every instinct screaming for a place to hide, a crack in the world to crawl into and disappear.

A turn. He veered left.

The street narrowed, darker now, shadows pressing in on him.

His legs burned, every step a fire in his muscles, but he kept going, lungs heaving, his mind spiraling. There was no way out.

He couldn't outrun him.

He *knew* he couldn't outrun him.

Then he saw it.

A corner—a narrow creek between two massive dumpsters, cluttered with cardboard boxes.

Luke didn't think.

He bolted for it, his steps clumsy as he skidded into the space, ducking between the piles and hastily tucking himself into the corner. His hands scrambled to pull one of the boxes in front of him, creating a flimsy shield. His knees drew to his chest as he coiled tight, his breath catching in his throat.

Just in time.

The moment he stilled, he heard it.

The air shifted, heavy and charged, and then—

Hermes appeared.

Luke's breath caught.

It was him.

*Crazed blue eyes glowing in the dark.*

Luke pressed a hand over his mouth, his other arm clutching his knees. His heart pounded so loudly it felt deafening, like it would give him away. But he couldn't stop staring. His eyes refused to shut, refused to look away.

Then—

Then it wasn't just Hermes.

It was Mercury.

Then it was both.

And they fought.

One moment, Hermes stood alone, snarling, his fists flying.

The next, Mercury surged forward into existence, his form snapping into place as if from nowhere. Hermes hit the ground a moment later, as though Mercury had just shoved him back with a force that cracked the earth beneath them.

Then, Mercury was alone—only to be slammed into the wall with a sickening crunch, the impact shaking the air, as if Hermes had hurled him there with equal force.

Until—

Until they coexisted.

Luke's breath hitched, stuttering as he saw it happen.

Both gods flickered, and then suddenly, both were there.

Their auras lashed out violently, crashing into each other like two storms colliding in the same sky.

Snarls and insults ripped through the chaos, vicious, their voices overlapping, blending into something monstrous.

The world rebelled against them.

The ground fractured and swirled, particles floating unnaturally, slowing and twisting like they were caught in a warped current. The edges of reality itself seemed to distort, bending and folding in on itself, flashes of blinding color bleeding into the darkened space around them.

Luke blinked, his vision splitting, and for a moment, he saw something impossible.

Where the gods stood, brilliant silver and gray streaked through the air, their forms tangled together by writhing tendrils of energy. The tendrils lashed out violently, the gods clashing, their movements wild and desperate, as if they were trying to tear themselves apart, to separate from the unnatural connection.

The connection made them rage.

It wasn't supposed to exist.

Luke blinked again, and suddenly it was Hermes' hands wrapped around Mercury's throat, choking him with a snarl, his glowing eyes blazing with fury. Mercury kicked him back, his teeth gleaming as he snarled in return, his form rippling with an inhuman energy.

The world continued to warp and twist around them, the distortion rippling outward in waves. The space between them bending as if reality couldn't handle them both.

*It was horrifying.*

The sounds—tearing, scraping, like flesh being ripped apart and metal grinding against metal —were unbearable.

Luke couldn't take it.

He curled in on himself, scuttling back further, pressing into the corner as tightly as he could. His hands clamped over his ears, his eyes squeezing shut, but it didn't matter. No amount of blocking it out worked.

It continued. And continued.

Until—

Silence.

Then steps. Slow, deliberate, coming closer.

Luke's heart stuttered, the pounding in his chest so loud it felt like it would choke him.

Slowly, with his breath caught in his throat, he curled tighter, daring to lift his head just enough to watch the entrance of his hiding spot. His breath came fast and shallow as he stared, wide-eyed, at the boxes in front of him.

One by one, they were shoved aside. The movements felt like slow motion, dragging out the inevitable. Luke was so out of it, so overwhelmed, that everything seemed distant, unreal.

Then—a body, in shadow, crouching.

His breath caught, his stomach twisting.

*Then relief.*

Silver eyes, glowing faintly in the dimness, shifting—fading, slowly, back to familiar brown flecked with green. Mercury's face appeared, his hair ruffled, his clothes torn, golden liquid trickling from a cut on his temple, from gashes across his face.

Ichor.

The blood of the gods.

But Mercury didn't look victorious. His brow was furrowed, his lips twisted into a grimace, the effort of holding back Hermes etched into every line of his face.

Luke knew—he *knew*—his father could force his way back at any moment.

And yet, despite it all, Luke scuttled closer. His body moved before his mind could catch up, instinct pulling him toward the only semblance of safety he could find.

He got close enough for Mercury to reach him, and Mercury did—his hand moving to drag a thumb gently across Luke's cheek. It was careful, almost soft.

Then it froze.

The hand twitched, jerking back slightly as Mercury hissed, his face twisting. His eyes closed tightly, his form flickering like a flame caught in the wind. For a moment, Luke thought Hermes would reappear, but Mercury stayed.

"Are you okay?" Luke whispered, his voice barely audible, his gaze fixed on the streaks of golden blood.

His fingers twitched as he stared at the ichor, glowing faintly under the darkening sky. Before he could stop himself, his hand reached out, grabbing Mercury's.

Luke's eyes traced over the cuts on his knuckles, the ichor dripping in slow trails. He hesitated, his fingers hovering just above the wounds, then pressed lightly, brushing against the torn skin.

Gold stained his fingertips.

“Sweet *deliciae,*” Mercury crooned, his voice soft and syrupy, a smug glint flashing in his silver eyes. For one fleeting second, the pain seemed to fade from his face, replaced by an infuriatingly pleased expression. But then—

The pain came roaring back, twisting his features into a grimace.

“I will be,” Mercury said, his tone strained but still laced with that odd fondness. “But, *columba,* you must go back to that ship of yours.”

Luke clutched the god’s hand between both of his, tighter now. Mercury’s hand shifted slightly, his fingers pressing lightly against Luke’s in return.

“I have to get supplies,” Luke protested with a whisper, his voice thin. “The ship’s in a bad state. If I don’t—”

“I will give it to you,” Mercury cut in smoothly, his voice firm, leaving no room for argument.

His free hand—steady despite the visible strain on his body—extended, palm up, and the list appeared there, materializing out of nothing. Mercury’s eyes scanned it briefly, the glow within them flickering faintly before it intensified.

Then his eyes flared bright, going fully silver, glowing like molten metal.

A second later, a bag appeared at his side, summoned seemingly out of thin air. A faint glow pulsed around it before fading entirely, leaving the bag resting at his side.

“With a bonus,” Mercury said, his voice calm. He tilted his head slightly, his glowing eyes narrowing as they fixed on Luke, as if the god were dissecting him.

“For your quest,” he continued, his tone taking on an odd edge. “Normally...” He trailed off, his gaze sharpening, the silver glow in his eyes almost searing. “It wouldn’t be allowed. But now, it is within my power. So, I’ve seen fit to provide you with a few... gifts.”

Without another word, Mercury straightened, hauling Luke to his feet with one hand as if he weighed nothing.

“Use it wisely, *columba,*” the Roman said, his voice quieter now.

Luke blinked—and Mercury was gone.

For a single moment, he was still.

Not for long.

He grabbed the bag, his fingers curling tightly around the strap, and bolted out of the narrow alley. His chest felt tight, but he didn’t stop. He didn’t dare look back.

He didn't want to test his luck. He didn't know if Hermes would reappear.

The main street was darker now, the glow of the streetlights stretching long shadows across the cobblestones.

Luke kept moving, his head low, his steps quick. The city had fallen into a hush, the bustle of the day faded into the stillness of night. His own footsteps echoed faintly in the quiet, the sound unnerving against the quiet.

It was time to get back to the ship, to meet up with the girls. He quickened his pace, his heartbeat still hammering in his chest.

He twisted through smaller paths, the narrow streets darker, more closed in. His eyes darted to every corner, every shadowed alley. Paranoia made him glance over his shoulder, even when he knew no one was there.

Still, the dark felt heavier now, more oppressive, more dangerous.

Finally—finally—the dock came into view.

It was nearly empty now, the chaos and noise of the day replaced by the soft creak of ropes and the gentle lap of water against the ships' hulls. The faint lantern light swayed with the breeze, casting a dim, uneven glow over the pier.

Luke slowed, his breath catching up with him as his steps grew quieter. His shoulders relaxed slightly, but not completely. The bag weighed heavily against his side, but that didn't matter.

He needed to find the girls, regroup, get back to the ship—

Then—

He collided with someone.

The impact jolted him, his feet stumbling back a step as the bag thudded against his side.

"Watch it!" a voice snapped.

Luke froze.

That voice—it was familiar. *Too* familiar.

He looked up, his heart stuttering, and his breath hitched when he saw who it was.

Dean.

For a moment, they just stared at each other, equally stunned.

Luke's jaw tightened as his mind scrambled, and then the words spilled out like a floodgate had opened.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

Chapter End Notes

Crazy dad has finally lost his marbles, lol. Poor Luke—he just wanted to do his part and get back to the ship, but Hermes just had to start a game of tag from hell. That's why your son doesn't love you, Hermes…

A little glimpse into Hermes' mind: Luke has a Roman bastard after his ass (remember that Mercury said—with those exact words—that he wanted to take Luke, and take can mean many things), Luke has an unusual sensitivity to the gods' auras, and Luke somehow managed to ghost Hermes. So yeah, Hermes is not fine.

Also, Mercury! The house-trained god saving the day! He's finally getting his dove to feel comfortable around him—Luke finding him safe 👀👀👀.

As for the fight… I think it's pretty obvious by now that Hermes and Mercury are not the same god at all, but this chapter made it clear that their situation is a little more complicated than a simple case of body-sharing. In short, they cannot coexist. If Mercury is around, Hermes can't be in that area, and vice versa. A comparison that might help visualize it is a cup filled with water and oil; they are connected but remain completely separate.

In any case, thanks for reading! I hope you enjoyed it (I really liked this chapter, lol). As always, I appreciate all comments—no matter how late to the party!

What are your theories on how H&M (Hermes and Mercury) managed to coexist this time?

# Chapter 56: SoM - War-Tide

Chapter Summary

Luke interrogates some brats… before it's ruined by another godly visitor's arrival.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Tell me, you three—what possessed you brats to run away from Camp and come here?" Luke spoke slowly, massaging his temples.

A migraine. Because, of course, the day hadn't been stressful enough already. Now this on top of it? He didn't know what he did to deserve this, really.

*"I needed to come!"* Percy exclaimed, loud and stubborn, like the brat he was. His sea-green eyes flashed with defiance as he locked eyes with Luke, as if daring him to kick him out.

The audacity.

Luke really was losing his edge, it seemed. Brats challenging him. Hah. *Marvelous.* Just what he needed.

He didn't bother dignifying the fish brat with a response—arguing with him would be a waste of breath, and Luke already knew exactly where it would go. But... there was someone else here, aside from clueless brat number two—Tyson, who clearly seemed to be here just for the ride.

Someone who *should* have had at least a modicum of good sense.

And honestly? Luke was impressed.

Who would've guessed that little goody two-shoes, authority-fearing Dean would run away from Camp and *invade* a quest uninvited?

Luke's gaze locked onto him, someone who should have known better, someone older—though age, as Luke knew well, did not always bring maturity, much less wisdom. And as he gave Dean a slow, pointed once-over, the satyr's face turned red with outrage.

Luke snorted. Seemed like satyrs matured as slowly as the trees they liked to hug.

"And how—" Luke leaned forward, clasping his palms together, his fingertips lightly touching. "*Did you find us?*"

“I’m a Searcher, Luke,” Dean answered, crossing his arms defensively but refusing to meet Luke’s eyes. Instead, his gaze wandered to the lights hanging around the docks, as though they were the most fascinating thing in the world. But then he sighed, his hand passing over his mouth, a nervous gesture, before finally turning back to Luke.

There was a pause, a beat of hesitation, before Dean spoke again, more seriously this time. “I know the country. And I know you. I just had to think about what you’d probably do, and then I traced a path.” He shrugged lightly. “And here we are.”

He glanced at the sea then, almost involuntarily, his body tensing slightly as he caught sight of something—a ripple on the water, a cluster of bubbles rising to the surface. Dean shivered, his gaze darting back to Luke.

“Though...” he added, his voice quieter now, “if we didn’t have some… assistance, we wouldn’t have made it in time.”

His words trailed off, and then he cleared his throat, his posture shifting awkwardly, that telltale stiffness settling in—like he was addressing some invisible authority.

It made Luke squint, frowning. There was nobody here who should inspire *that* sort of reaction.

Dean hesitated again, his tone almost reverent now. “So we’re… extremely grateful. Very. A lot.”

Luke raised an eyebrow, unimpressed. Something wasn’t adding up.

“Grateful to who?” Clarisse snapped, her tone sharp, her glare cutting through the three like she was seconds away from tossing them into the ocean. Luke could practically *feel* the storm brewing behind her words, and it made him want to sigh.

“You three morons should be—”

“*Should* be explaining to us why exactly you came, since you didn’t give me a real answer,” Luke cut in smoothly, his voice calm but weighted just enough to redirect her fury. He sent Clarisse a pointed look, subtle but sharp.

She huffed in response but, thankfully, stayed quiet.

For about two seconds.

Clarisse’s shoulder bumped into Annabeth’s as she moved away, just enough to be annoying, and Annabeth, never one to let something slide, shoved her back with equal force.

Then Clarisse gave it right back.

Annabeth narrowed her eyes, her posture shifting like she was preparing for battle, and that was it—it derailed from there.

Luke watched the exchange with a flicker of exasperation but didn't intervene. At least they were occupied now, their energy redirected from picking fights with the others—the *invaders,* as Clarisse had so eloquently called them the moment she laid eyes on them, her face twisting into a snarl.

Or more specifically, from picking fights with *Percy.*

Now, though, the girls had turned on each other instead, snapping back and forth, throwing insults like it was some kind of sport, and yanking at each other's hair like toddlers fighting over a toy. Not exactly productive, but at least it kept them from causing *other* problems.

Though, to be fair, that was mostly Clarisse.

"Well," Dean said, casting the girls a wary sidelong glance before subtly shifting away—like he was afraid whatever *that* was might be contagious or, worse, that he'd somehow get dragged into their ridiculous play-fighting.

Luke, on the other hand, was numb to it. After an entire day of *this* exact thing, where he didn't even have the luxury of walking away when he got sick of it like he could at Camp, he could almost say he was used to it.

Somewhat.

Maybe.

Mostly just tired.

Dean cleared his throat, pulling Luke's attention back. "You remember what I told you before you left?"

Remember?

Luke furrowed his brows, mind scrambling. So much had happened in just a day—it *felt* like weeks had passed, and he was still rattled, still running on frayed nerves and adrenaline. He had to—

Then, suddenly, it hit him.

*Of course.*

He cursed himself for not thinking of it earlier. The signs were all there.

"The empathy bond thing you smelled under Percy's smelly fish scent?" Luke asked flatly.

Percy immediately puffed up in outrage at being called smelly, but Luke barely spared him a glance. The kid also shuffled slightly, uncertainty creeping in now that the subject was actually being discussed instead of danced around.

Brats.

Luke was the *master* of talking in circles. No one was going to outdo him at his own game.

"Yes." Dean cast a fleeting glance in Percy's direction. "I went to confront the kid—figured that was my best shot at finding out where Grover went. And, lucky me, turns out the dreams that kicked off this whole quest?" His eyes gleamed now, sharp with something almost triumphant, though bitter too. "They were *because* Grover was contacting him in his sleep."

Dean scoffed, then jabbed a finger toward Percy, who flinched, shrinking into himself just slightly.

"And this brat—" he gestured sharply, his voice dripping with accusation—"didn't tell *anyone* until I went and pressed him!"

"No one was going to believe me! They barely did during that meeting until the prophecy confirmed that I was right!" Percy shot back, frustration flashing across his face. Then, hesitating, he shifted uncomfortably, his gaze flickering toward Annabeth. "I told *one* person, though. Just… not you."

"We *all* know about Grover, Prissy. Annabeth told us," Clarisse cut in, momentarily abandoning her argument with Annabeth to turn and face the group. Her expression had hardened, all sharp edges now, any trace of amusement or mockery gone. "And we were already planning to save him. We weren't just gonna leave him there."

"Yeah, Percy," Annabeth added, stepping forward, her gaze steady as she approached him. She met his eyes as if trying to reassure him, like she was about to say something more, but before she could—

"So that means *everyone* knew but me?" Dean burst out, his voice laced with outrage. "Are you serious? If I had known earlier—"

"We only found out when we set sail, Dean," Luke interrupted smoothly, cutting him off before his friend could wind himself up any further. "Annabeth told us then. Not before."

"Yeah," Annabeth nodded, then shrugged when Dean shot her an ugly look, completely unrepentant—which only seemed to make him even more outraged. "We were already on the ship and heading into the quest, so I figured it made the most sense to tell *them* since we were the ones actually going there. Telling anyone else would've just caused—"

She tilted her chin up, fixing Dean with a pointed stare, her posture straight, almost arrogant —very Ryan-like, Luke noted. Then, in a tone so deliberately backhanded it might as well have been a slap, she finished.

"*This.*"

"You brat—"

"Okay then," Luke cut in again, already feeling so done with all of this.

It was like wrangling a bunch of overdramatic children who were determined to cry and hit each other just for the sake of making a scene. And Dean—Dean was older than him, for

God's sake. He should know better.

Still, Luke's gaze flicked toward the dock, scanning the crowd despite himself, searching for anything out of place. He was tired, but the nervous energy from *that* encounter hadn't left him yet.

They needed to leave. Urgently.

*Hermes—*

He cut the thought off before it could take root, forcing a smile to mask the unease clawing at his gut. His gaze flicked from Dean to Percy. "Now we know why you two are here—to save Grover."

Clarisse muttered something under her breath, something suspiciously like *intruders,* which earned her a sharp jab to the side from Annabeth. Clarisse immediately turned to glare daggers at her, but Annabeth didn't even acknowledge it.

Luke ignored them both and turned his attention to Tyson. The kid wasn't paying attention to the argument at all. Instead, he was watching the ghost soldiers move about the ship, his one big brown eye tracking their every motion with open fascination. He fidgeted with his fingers as he followed their movements, but the specters, in turn, ignored him.

Ignored all of them, actually.

Lord, how he wished he could do the same.

Still, Luke tilted his head slightly, then smiled again—colder this time.

And the kids felt it. He could tell by the way their postures stiffened.

"What I *want* to know now," he continued, his voice smooth, even, "is why Tyson is here. Because you two have very clear reasons for being out here. But *him*?" He gestured to the young cyclops. "Tyson has no reason to be anywhere but back at Camp Half-Blood."

His smile didn't falter, though his voice dipped just slightly. "He's just a *child.* Under the quest age limit, even. So why is he here?"

"I couldn't just leave him back there," Percy answered, his sea-green eyes locking onto Luke's with surprising firmness. "The other campers… they don't like him. And Dad—"

"*Dad?*" Luke repeated before he could stop himself, the word rolling off his tongue like it was foreign. The girls blinked, both turning to stare at Percy.

But Percy didn't flinch under their stares. He held Luke's gaze as he continued, "Yeah. *Dad.* He sent me a message after you guys left. It was vague, but I *thought* it meant something, because why else would he send it then? And then Dean confronted me, and we figured—" He shrugged slightly. "We figured we'd go after you, join up, since I have to save Grover and Dean wanted to help. And then Tyson had a dream—he said—"

“Daddy told me we would be playing in the water!” Tyson interrupted brightly, his face lighting up as he shuffled closer to Percy, beaming. “Ride fish ponies!”

Percy smiled back, though it was awkward, like he wasn’t sure how to handle the sheer excitement radiating off Tyson. And Luke saw it then—just for a second—something flicker across Percy’s face.

A little bit of jealousy.

Still, Poseidon interfering—that was unexpected.

Luke hadn’t accounted for that. From what he’d gathered from Percy’s offhanded mumbles—half-spoken words about godly parents, words that Luke had listened to and *understood* all too well. He had offered vague words of comfort in return, whatever sympathy he could afford to show, but never too much. Never enough to let anything slip.

He had bitten back a dozen more.

Poseidon, like all gods, was distant and silent. And in the books, he had only ever acted in roundabout ways, his interference indirect at best. He hadn’t spoken to Percy—not really. Just vague words—short conversations, cryptic messages that never said enough, leaving the Percy of those books sad, aching for connection.

Just like *this* one.

No, in the books, *Hermes* had been the one to urge Percy to leave Camp, to go to the ship and save his *precious*, his *favorite* son.

The one who had turned traitor—and even then, he couldn’t bring himself to let go.

*Luke.* Book-Luke.

*Precious.*

Luke repeated the word silently, rubbing his arm. The bruise still ached, though he hadn’t let himself look at it yet. He wondered if the marks of fingers were there—if his father had gripped him so tightly that it had sunk deep into his skin, marked him.

He didn’t need to check to know he could still *feel* them.

A shiver crawled up his spine, unbidden. The memory crept in, unwelcome—wild eyes, words spat out with something manic in them, something raw, uncontrolled.

*Precious.*

He didn’t think being the favorite was a good thing.

Luke swallowed hard and shoved the thought away, rubbing his arms to chase off the cold creeping into his limbs.

*Not now. Focus.*

"And we are *very, very* grateful for the graciousness of the Lord of the Sea," Dean was spluttering, glancing warily at the water like Poseidon himself might rise up and smite him for any perceived disrespect.

And maybe he *was* watching. Luke couldn't be sure.

But honestly? He almost hoped he was.

Because if Poseidon had his eyes on them, then maybe Hermes wouldn't come sweeping in to try and kidnap him again. Luke doubted it would look great if a god outright stole a demigod in the middle of an important quest—even if that demigod was his own son.

And there was also the whole not interfering too much in quests thing the gods supposedly followed.

…Right?

"So, your father told you to come?" Annabeth mused, staring at Percy with furrowed brows, though Clarisse's expression was even more pinched—her face settling into the kind of realization she *really* didn't want to have.

The realization that she couldn't kick Percy out.

And judging by the way her rust-colored eyes practically burned, that fact made her furious.

"Not really," Percy admitted, scratching the back of his head. His gaze flicked to the sea, like he was still trying to puzzle it out himself. "He didn't say anything, but he helped me—*us*." He shrugged. "So… what now?"

Luke exhaled, running a hand over his face before settling them on his hips. His gaze swept over Dean, Percy, and Tyson before he let out a resigned sigh.

"Well, since you're already here," he said, "you might as well stay."

"What?"

Clarisse exploded, whirling around so fast it was a miracle she didn't knock anyone over. Her eyes blazed as she turned on him.

"This is *my* quest!"

"And what would you have us do?" Luke shot back, far calmer than she probably wanted him to be, pinching the bridge of his nose like he was already exhausted. He gestured toward Percy, Dean, and Tyson, then gave her a pointed look. "We can't exactly kick them out, can we?"

Clarisse's jaw clenched, her teeth grinding together as she glared at him, as if sheer force of will alone could make him change his answer. But, alas, Luke was right, and she knew it.

And judging by the look on her face, she had decided—rather than admit that—she'd just redirect her fury onto someone else.

Her gaze snapped to Percy, the one person she *really* didn't want here.

"You can never not stick your nose into things that don't concern you, can you, Prissy?"

"You're right, I should've just let my best friend rot in a cyclops' cave. *My bad,*" Percy shot back, sarcasm dripping from every word as he met Clarisse's glare with an unfriendly look of his own.

"I already told you—"

"We were going to save Grover anyway, Percy," Annabeth cut in, stepping between them before the argument could turn physical, playing mediator for once.

But Luke saw the conflict in her face, the way she looked between them like she couldn't quite decide which side to stand on.

Luke would *much* prefer she chose neither.

"But more hands to help would be appreciated," she finished, her voice steady, though there was a slight tension to it.

"Oh, Miss Princess," Clarisse snorted, arms crossing tightly. "You forgetting something? We walk in packs of threes for a reason. And now with *him*—" she gestured toward Percy with a flick of her hand, so dismissive it was like she was shooing away a bug—"he's just going to make everything more dangerous."

Percy's face flushed red. "I *can't* exactly help it, can I?"

*Great*, Luke thought, watching as Clarisse straightened slightly, eyes gleaming with the satisfaction of hitting a nerve. *Time to get these brats back on track before they start throwing punches.*

This really was a kindergarten. And somehow, he had been stuck as the underpaid, overworked babysitter. Except there wasn't even pay involved, just a mounting headache.

He snapped his fingers a few times, cutting through the brewing tension with a clipped voice. "Alright, *all* of you. We have more important things to focus on right now."

Clasping his hands in front of him, he sent a pointed look toward the pile of supplies they had gathered earlier. "Like repairing the ship before we set sail again."

Clarisse huffed but backed down, throwing a glance at the ship, her expression tight—like it had been ever since the damage had started piling up. Annabeth, too, pressed her lips together until they were a thin line, her sharp eyes already cataloging the damage.

The other three just looked confused at first—until their gazes finally landed on the ship. Maybe they hadn't *really* noticed it before, with how dark it was, but now that Luke had

pointed it out, the damage was impossible to ignore.

Dean's face pinched as he took it in, his jaw tightening. Percy's eyes locked onto the dents, lips parted slightly, as if only just realizing how bad it was.

And Tyson…

Tyson imitated their expressions, furrowing his brow in what Luke assumed was an attempt at concern, but he didn't seem to *get* it.

Not really.

Luke let out a quiet sigh and moved toward the supplies, more specifically *his* bag. He didn't want the others poking around in it, not when he still had no idea what, exactly, Mercury had given him. And if they did ask? What was he supposed to say? What excuse could he give for carrying around godly gifts—*Mercury's* gifts—when he was only supposed to have the supplies from the list?

Sure, he could claim divine interference, but he wasn't about to lie and say they were from his *father*.

The thought of Hermes made something cold slither down his spine.

*No. Focus.*

Luke dropped his gaze back to the bag, digging through it, half-listening to the others.

The girls were muttering between themselves, Annabeth cataloging supplies while Clarisse snapped orders at the shades. Percy's voice cut through the conversation every now and then —sometimes with a question, only to be promptly shut down by Clarisse's usual sharp-edged remarks or met with a clipped, distracted response from Annabeth.

Dean stepped closer, and Luke flicked a glance up at him before returning to his search. But something made him look back up, his brows knitting together.

His friend caught the look and frowned in return. "Do I—"

Luke didn't hear the rest.

His focus had shifted up, his eyes locking on a point in the dark sky. He squinted, struggling to make sense of what he was seeing. It grew closer, a silhouette against the night, its shape becoming clearer by the second.

A vulture.

A *vulture*, flying at night.

Luke didn't know enough about birds to say whether that was normal or not, but it felt wrong. Out of place. Even more so here, circling above a dock.

He didn't think vultures were supposed to be in this area at all.

And yet, this one was.

And it was moving fast. Faster than it should have been.

Before he could even process it fully, the bird had landed on the railing of the ship.

It was *big*.

Frankly, intimidating in size.

Perched there, its talons gripping the metal, it looked strange—too large, too purposeful in the way it held itself. It had to be at least the size of Luke's entire torso, and if it spread its wings, he was sure it would be bigger than him.

It stared at them with beady red eyes—*were vultures supposed to have red eyes?*—eyes that Luke swore he had seen before.

Then, without warning, it shifted.

The change was slow, almost deliberate. Feathers rippled and melted away, the sharp curve of its beak retracting, limbs stretching and twisting into something human.

The shape of a man began to emerge where the bird had been.

Tall. Muscled. *Massive.*

Biceps the size of Luke's head, a towering presence that—somewhere in the back of his mind—Luke noted was even taller than Peter. Similar to his friend, but not quite. Less tranquil, more restless. But the thought was fleeting, drowned out by the sheer weight of the aura radiating from him, pressing down like a war drum pounding inside Luke's skull.

It was suffocating.

*Violence*, it screamed.

*Fight,* it demanded.

Rage. Blood. Destruction.

He was dressed in black—fitted jeans, a tight black shirt that did nothing to hide the sheer strength packed into his frame, and a leather jacket, with spikes on the shoulders like something straight out of a biker gang.

His hair was short, cropped close, black as tar. Clean-shaven. Sharp.

And then there were his eyes.

*Red*.

Glowing.

The color of blood. Wild. Maniacal. Darting around like he was always searching for a target, barely leashed violence flickering just beneath the surface.

And then those eyes locked on.

Like a machine gun locking onto a target.

Luke tensed. His blood boiled beneath his skin, heat rising like a fever, his muscles tightening with the overwhelming, instinctual urge to—

*Fight. Fight. Fight.*

His teeth ground together as he forced himself to resist it. *This isn't me.*

It was the aura—*his* aura—seeping into him, pressing into his bones, igniting something raw and dangerous inside him. A pull to let the beast out, to rip something apart with his teeth, to crush something under his fists, to make the world feel his frustration, to finally unleash everything he'd buried since childhood.

But that wasn't him.

Luke sucked in a sharp breath, fingers curling tight around the fabric of his bag, holding onto it like an anchor. He forced himself to control his breathing, slow and deliberate, as he pulled his own energy inward, curling it around himself, forming a boundary—a shield.

Tiny. Fragile.

He didn't even know if it would work.

But then—

It *did*.

The haze lifted, the suffocating pressure pulling back just enough for him to *think* again.

He knew who this was.

*Ares*.

And the god *smiled.*

A wide thing, all teeth—more like a beast baring its fangs than any real sign of happiness or joy. And yet, he seemed joyful as he stepped forward, completely ignoring the rest of them. His focus was locked onto only one person.

Clarisse.

"My daughter!"

His voice crashed through the air like war trumpets, loud, commanding, cutting through the space with a weight that demanded attention.

Clarisse squeaked.

“Dad!”

Her eyes were wide, shock written all over her face, like she couldn’t quite process that he was *here*.

And honestly? Luke felt the same. Ares showing up now, *out of nowhere*, was as much a surprise to him as it was to her.

"Striking the final blow against a sea serpent—*hah!* That’s the blood of warriors running hot in your veins." Ares’ grin stretched wide, his bloodlust thick enough to choke the air. "That’s my daughter. That’s *war*. You make me proud, Clarisse."

Clarisse—*Clarisse*—actually blushed.

Luke barely believed it.

She shifted on her feet, clearly flustered, but covered it up almost immediately, shooting a glare at the rest of them that did absolutely nothing to hide her embarrassment. It was like she was daring them to comment, challenging them to say something about it.

Like they were supposed to just mind their own business.

Which, frankly, was pretty damn hard to do when Ares was standing there, radiating enough raw aggression to make them all want to throw hands at each other.

Luke still felt it—that itch under his skin, the urge to deck someone in the face for no reason at all. It pressed against him, simmering just beneath the surface, clawing at his self-control. And Ares wasn’t just there—he was commanding attention, holding every single one of them hostage just by existing, drawing their focus to him and Clarisse like they had no choice but to watch.

And whatever he said, they could hear.

Not that Ares seemed to care about them. If anything, he hadn’t even registered their presence—at least—

Until, suddenly, his head snapped to the side, his burning red eyes landing squarely on Percy.

Percy, who was snarling.

Annabeth had a tight grip on his arm, holding him back, her own body tensed, muscles coiled like she was fighting the same pull—but she was breathing slow, steady. Her eyes were sharp, focused. A daughter of Wisdom. She wasn’t about to let rage cloud her mind.

Ares tilted his head as he took a step forward, his grin shifting—less amusement now, more like an animal baring its teeth.

"And *you*," he sneered, voice dripping with condescension as he loomed closer.

"Little guppy."

Percy struggled, all coiled tension and barely restrained fury, Annabeth gritting her teeth as she fought to keep her hold on him. And Ares—Ares just watched, like a predator waiting for its prey to make the first move.

Like he wanted Percy to snap.

"Come on, rage, little guppy," Ares goaded. "Attack me. Take your shot. And know that tricks won't work anymore. I am Ares, and I am entirely myself now."

"I'll cut you again, you oversized meathead—" Percy snapped, as mouthy as ever, even with Annabeth practically wrestling him back.

Ares' eyes narrowed.

And the air *changed*.

The pressure spiked, crushing, like a force pressing down on Luke's chest. His breath stuttered. His fingers clenched against his bag.

Then, just as suddenly, the ship lurched, rocking violently as if struck by an unseen wave.

Ares scoffed.

But the weight of his presence didn't lift.

"Lord Ares—" Luke started, forcing his voice steady as he slowly got to his feet, his movements careful. He shut his bag swiftly, sliding it onto his shoulders as smoothly as he could.

No way in hell was he standing here, in front of a Greek god, with a bag full of things Mercury had given him—a Roman god—unchecked.

Ares turned to him, slowly, his burning gaze locking onto Luke like a wolf sizing up prey.

Luke hesitated.

His heartbeat pounded wrong, out of sync—half of him screaming *fight fight fight*, the other half *run run run*. The god's aura pushed down hard, thick as a battlefield haze, pressing at his instincts, urging him to act.

He *refused*.

Sweat trailed down the back of his neck, but he kept himself still, kept his voice steady, controlled.

"We are very grateful for the ship you have provided, though…" His eyes flicked to the side, catching Percy just in his periphery—Annabeth gripping his arm, half coaching, half scolding.

Luke turned back to Ares and dipped his head just slightly, his words laced with careful respect.

"We are quite surprised—though *deeply* honored—that you have deemed us worthy of standing in your presence."

Ares didn't respond immediately. He tilted his head, his gaze dragging over Luke, studying him like he was some puzzle he couldn't quite place. Then he let out a sharp huff, almost amused.

"That tongue of yours is very much Hermes', Luke Castellan." His lips curled into something that wasn't quite a smile. "But yes, I came to check on my daughter. Her first quest—and a *glorious* one at that. To save Camp Half-Blood—"

He straightened to his full height, and *Lord*, he was tall. Towering over Luke, over everyone—taller than Hermes even, *much* taller than his father. He rubbed his chin, considering something, before adding, almost like an afterthought:

"And worry not, demigods. Olympus has sent reinforcements. Your Camp is protected—your forces will not be spent beyond what they can endure. Argus has returned as well."

Then he laughed.

The sound was *wrong*.

*Like flesh ripping, like blood boiling, like the distant roar of a battlefield.*

"Athena raged when her little punishment was overturned. But alas, she cannot have everything. Argus belongs to *Mother*. It has always been so. And she knows it."

"We are very grateful the gods have seen fit to assist us," Luke said, his voice reverential enough, carefully measured.

And that was all he was going to say.

He wasn't touching the Athena mention. Not with a ten-foot pole. He wasn't about to make one god mad just to please another.

Out of the corner of his eye, he caught sight of Dean, trembling where he stood, his hooves clacking softly against the ship's floor. But Ares didn't seem to care. Didn't even acknowledge it.

Instead, the god raised an eyebrow, blood-red eyes locking onto Luke.

“Assist we did, but salvation comes by your own hands—gripping and tearing, little warrior,” Ares said, his voice almost amused.

Then he pointed a finger straight at Luke’s face.

“You know that. All those years ago, you took action yourself.”

His eyes flashed, wild, feverish. His voice swelled with something that almost sounded like glee.

"Raging in the battlefield! Tearing monsters down left and right! Alone, even. *Ἀνδρεῖος*." His grin stretched, sharp as a war axe. "Courageous. Battle-hardened. Worthy."

He sighed then, the sound almost disappointed, almost wistful, as he turned away, heading back toward Clarisse.

“I would have blessed you then,” he said, almost offhandedly. “Alas—” his shoulders lifted in a slow shrug—“I couldn’t.”

*Couldn’t?* Luke echoed in his head, the word sticking like glue in his thoughts.

“But if you wish for it…” Ares continued, letting the words settle. “I will never not assist a warrior I deem worthy. This modern world of softness needs those who will stand and fight.”

*What.*

Luke’s mind raced for the right response—something that wouldn’t offend, wouldn’t encourage.

“I’m… deeply honored, Lord Ares,” he said, keeping his tone respectful, measured. “I’ve always admired the strength of true warriors.”

Then, as smoothly as he could, he steered the conversation elsewhere.

“But right now, our priority is ensuring the ship is ready to complete this quest—to prove ourselves through action, to earn our own glory, and to bring salvation to those who depend on us.”

His grip on his bag tightened slightly as he dipped his head in deference—just enough to show respect, but not enough to seem like he was accepting anything.

Or, more importantly, rejecting him outright.

*Crazed blue eyes in the dark.*

“Well said, little warrior,” Ares said, sounding almost approving.

Luke barely stopped himself from exhaling in relief, though his nerves were still burning, raw and frayed.

Ares' eyes gleamed. "Prove your worth."

Then his gaze swept over the ship, and the longer he looked, the deeper the frown carved into his face. Out of the corner of his eye, Luke caught sight of Dean—stiff as a board, looking like he might actually faint.

"But this talk of the ship being ready…"

"Dad," Clarisse cut in, her voice firm despite the way she hesitated. She looked *small* next to him—not the strong, battle-hardened fifteen-year-old she was, but a child overshadowed by her father's sheer presence. And yet, she stood straight, chin lifted. "The ship… needs repairs before we can set sail. We were about to start."

She paused, then forced the words out. "I'll do better. Next time, next battles—I *swear* the gift you gave me won't take a scratch."

Ares snorted, the sound almost fond, before reaching out and ruffling her hair, completely ruining what was left of her already-messy ponytail.

"Daughter of mine," he said, voice thick with something between pride and condescension, "war is never bloodless. It breaks, it tears, it destroys. So I'm not surprised."

Then his eyes sharpened.

"But you *are* right. You questers—and the…" He flicked his gaze toward Percy.

Percy snarled.

Ares sneered back, full of mockery, like he was daring Percy to do something about it. Then, without much thought, he glanced toward Dean—who was stiff as a corpse, looking like he was about to keel over—before shifting his attention to Tyson, his brow furrowing slightly.

Finally, he turned back to Clarisse, his voice final.

"… tagalongs cannot set sail with the ship in this state."

"Lord Ares, we already have the repair supplies ready—we *will* fix it," Luke cut in quickly, gripping his bag tightly, holding it close like the god might just take it from him. At the same time, he pulled it open, reaching in to start pulling out the supplies—physical proof of his words.

Ares glanced at him, face unreadable, those blood-red eyes locking onto him for a moment too long.

Then, just as easily, his attention shifted away as soon as Clarisse started to speak, like Luke wasn't worth keeping his focus on.

Not like *she* was.

Which, honestly? Was a relief.

Luke breathed a little easier.

“I was going to ask the shades,” Clarisse added, her voice steady, posture firm as she explained. Ares turned his attention back to her, watching intently, unblinking.

Which was… *unnerving*.

Then again, *gods* were unnerving.

Luke barely processed the rest of the conversation, his mind buzzing, his pulse ticking faster as a much more pressing thought settled in.

What the hell was going on today?

This was the third god he’d seen in a single day.

And he really, *really* didn’t like that.

Then Luke stiffened.

Something shifted. A pressure—worse than before, heavier, suffocating. His skin prickled, his breath hitched.

Ares’ face had twisted into a glare.

And everyone felt it.

Even Percy, who looked like he wanted to fight through it, but his hands clenched at his sides, his knuckles white. Even Tyson, who looked ready to *cry*. Even Dean, who staggered back against the railing, his legs shaking so hard they barely held him up.

Annabeth had gone pale, eyes darting between Ares and the ship like she was already calculating what was about to happen.

Clarisse, though—she just went still, her posture tense, rigid, but she didn’t look scared. Not at all.

Ares, however, wasn’t looking at them. His gaze was locked on the ship.

Then, without a word, he lifted a hand.

Luke held his breath, his mind immediately spiraling—conjuring scenarios, each one worse than the last.

Had they somehow displeased him? Were they about to get smitten by an unhinged war god for wrecking the ship he had gifted his daughter? It made sense—the ship was… not on a good state, and gods were nothing if not unpredictable.

But the more rational part of his mind shoved back. *That’s stupid. He just said war isn’t clean.*

And yet, that inner argument continued to battle in his head right up until—

Ares snapped his fingers.

The sound cut through the space like a thread being severed.

*And everything shifted.*

Power surged—around Luke, above him, beneath him, everywhere at once.

Then the ship twisted.

Luke barely had time to process it before a shriek of metal rang through the air, so loud and sharp it made his ears ache. He winced, crouching, hands flying up to cover his ears as the sound of bending, grinding steel rattled through him.

The dents in the hull straightened, the scratches on the surface mended themselves—not like they were being repaired, but like they had never been there at all.

And that wasn't all.

Because the ship wasn't just fixing itself.

It was *changing*.

"There. *Fixed*," Ares declared, satisfaction dripping from his tone as he turned back to Clarisse.

She was still staring at the ship, eyes wide—so wide it looked like they might pop out of her skull.

"Now you can sail into deep waters without worrying about ending up in a sea burial," Ares continued, like what he'd just done was nothing. "You mentioned those technical problems."

He scoffed, like the very concept of technical issues was beneath him.

"This ship *will* hold."

"Thank—thank you, Dad," Clarisse whispered, struggling to tear her eyes away from the ship to look up at him.

And somehow, Luke got the distinct impression that just those words alone made Ares puff up like a peacock.

He ruffled her hair again, his smile now a little softer—less of a snarl, less bared teeth, and more… fond. Almost.

"You're my daughter," he said, as if that explained everything.

Then he stepped back, and Luke felt the shift immediately—the god's aura pulling inward, coalescing around him, so thick it almost seemed visible.

Luke squinted.

For a brief second, it was like a haze surrounded Ares, faint and red, shifting around him like heat rising off asphalt.

Ares cast one last glance at them all, tilting his head slightly before offering, “Demigods, the path ahead will be difficult. But the gods are watching.”

He smiled then—not quite soft, but something lighter, something distant.

“I’m not the only one.”

And then, without another word, his form shifted.

Luke barely had time to register it before a vulture leapt from the ship, wings catching the air as it soared into the night, growing smaller and smaller until it disappeared into the darkness.

The only sound was their breathing—harsh, uneven—as the violent haze of Ares’ aura finally faded, leaving behind a strange hollowness. Like they had all been holding their breath without realizing it, bracing against something that wasn’t there anymore.

The kind of silence that felt stunned, like no one could quite believe what had just happened.

Luke inhaled deeply, steadying his nerves.

Then his eyes flicked to the dock. To the streets below.

*Something shifted in the dark.*

His skin crawled.

*Hermes.*

The thought came unbidden, instinctual. His pulse spiked.

*Stupid,* he told himself. *It’s nothing.*

And yet—

His body locked up for half a second, that same tension returning, the feeling of being *watched* threading through his nerves like ice.

Or maybe… *not* stupid.

“Let’s get going,” he said suddenly, standing, urgency creeping into his voice as he cast a sharp glance at the others. “*Now.*”

The ship was repaired. They had already spent too long in Norfolk.

And they *needed* to leave.

Immediately, Clarisse snapped into motion, barking orders at her ghost soldiers. Annabeth, still stunned for a moment longer, quickly shook it off and fell into step beside her, offering suggestions—some ignored, some argued with, and some actually followed, as the two children of war gods commanded the ship with an almost instinctual ease.

Percy blinked, shaking his head like he was trying to clear it, his frown deep as he glanced at the sky. Tyson shuffled closer to him, gripping his shirt in a way that was almost funny—so childlike, despite how much bigger he was. Percy sighed, turning his attention to his monstrous brother, whispering words Luke assumed were meant to calm him down.

And Dean…

Dean was *wrecked*.

He sat on the deck, legs bent, hands between them, his eyes wide and unfocused as he stared at the ground like he still couldn't process what had just happened.

Luke stepped closer but didn't say anything, simply settling near him. Dean barely spared him a glance before sinking back into his stupor, lost in either deep reflection or quiet, lingering fear.

Luke sighed, leaning against the railing as the ship finally moved, the Norfolk dock growing smaller and smaller, fading into the distance as they drifted further away.

*Finally.*

They were heading to the Sea of Monsters.

And Luke wondered how things would go this time.

Chapter End Notes

Percy had to come. No way he was staying back—not with Grover's life on the line. And if Percy came, then Tyson had to come too, because leaving a Cyclops alone at a Cyclops-hating camp? Yeah, not exactly a genius move. Dean showed up as well—dragged along or came of his own accord, the story changes every time you ask him. Either way, he's worried too. Knows Luke well enough, and his role as a Searcher gives him a good guess at potential stops.

And then there's… Ares. The man himself. War incarnate, showing up loud and proud like only he can. Clarisse is his little war machine, and he cares about her in his own godly way. As for the Luke situation—well, Hermes and his whole patronage thing seem to be doing their thing, keeping the others at bay. Lol.

Anyway, thanks for reading! I appreciate every comment, even the late ones—always love seeing your thoughts.

So—who do you think Ares was referring to?

# Chapter 57: SoM - Charybdis

Chapter Summary

> They finally made it to the edge of the Sea of Monsters. Of course, that's when everyone decided to start arguing about what came next. Didn't matter in the end—the sea made the choice for them.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The moment they arrived, *Luke felt* it.

The air changed.

Something was different—heavier, denser, like a weight pressing down on the space around them. And the Mist—thicker than he had ever seen it before. He could *see* it, a literal haze curling around them, so thick it blurred the edges of everything in sight. He blinked hard, trying to clear his vision, but the longer he focused on it, the harder it became to notice, like it was shifting away from his attention, slipping through his grasp.

That unnerved him more than he wanted to admit.

He had better control of his *sight* now, more than ever before, but there were still moments like this—when it felt like he was seeing too much and not enough at the same time.

And then there was the pull—his internal GPS blaring inside his head.

He knew exactly where they were.

They had traveled a long way, crossing both night and day, faster than any mortal ship should have. Faster than before, even. The changes Ares had made had worked—the ship had held, sturdy and solid beneath them.

Tyson—Luke knew from canon knowledge that the kid had some strange sense for the inner workings of things—hadn't found anything wrong with the ship.

Thankfully.

And now…

He wasn't looking at the ship.

He was staring out at the sea with a caution that seemed unnatural on him. At least, based on what little Luke had seen of him in the one day they had all been stuck together.

Luke spared the kid a glance, then turned his gaze back to the horizon. His brows furrowed, the minutes stretching, tension coiling in his chest—

And then, there it was.

An island.

Towering cliffs, jagged and rocky, something that looked straight out of the Greek isles, like it had been plucked from them and set here.

And to the side—

A dark spot in the sea. A storm raging where the sky met the water, thrashing, furious, an angry, gaping maw of chaos.

"Charybdis," Luke heard Annabeth mutter, standing beside Clarisse, who had her arms crossed, her expression set, serious, unreadable.

Luke pressed his lips together.

"Yes," Clarisse said, voice quieter than usual but firm, her eyes locked onto the storm.

"Charybdis… and Scylla."

Her fingers tightened around her arms.

"The entrance to the Sea of Monsters."

She exhaled, resolute.

*"Finally."*

"We could just sail around them," Percy chimed in, his voice edged with unease as he stared ahead, brows furrowed. "The sea's right there, wide open—we could just… turn the ship, find another entrance, something."

Luke caught the flicker of irritation in Clarisse's expression before she even spoke.

She was about to snap, something sharp, something abrasive—and that was the last thing they needed.

"We *could* use other paths," Luke said, keeping his tone measured as he turned to the younger demigods. "But every route has its own dangers—some worse than others. Take Thrinacia, the Island of the Sun. We *could* try to find it, but no one's seen it in a long time. Nor the Radiant."

He paused, then added, almost offhandedly, “Though Mr. D says that Titan is on some kind of prolonged vacation or something. It belongs to him, and even if we did find it, I doubt it’d be any safer.”

His gaze flicked back to the storm. “Then there are the Wandering Rocks—but only the Argo ever made it through, and that was with divine help.”

Turning back around, Luke met Percy’s gaze, calm.

“And besides… we can’t just avoid obstacles. Not in the Sea of Monsters.” He shook his head. “It doesn’t work that way.”

Luke shrugged, his expression unreadable, though something inside him felt distinctly unnerved.

*None of this was natural.*

“This isn’t Greece,” he muttered. “Every route leads to something supernatural—just like how this sea shouldn’t even exist here in the first place.”

Annabeth nodded, rubbing her chin as she studied the storm, her mind clearly working through the calculations. “This route was crossed. Odysseus made it through. If he did it, we can too.” She exhaled sharply, gaze firm. “We *have* to.”

Clarisse scoffed, dropping her arms to her sides. “We’re going through—right between them.”

*What?*

Between? No way in hell. Had she not been paying attention to any of the ancient history lessons? Circe warned Odysseus not to go between—losing six men to Scylla was better than losing *everyone* to Charybdis.

“Clarisse—” Luke started to protest, frowning.

“Oh, what?” Clarisse snapped, throwing her hands up. “You want to waste time now? We’ve got a time limit.” She narrowed her eyes at Luke. “What, you’d rather take a shot at the Wandering Rocks? See if we can end up like everyone but the Argo?” She rolled her eyes. “Odysseus hesitated. That’s why he lost men. We won’t.”

“We could just go around,” Percy muttered, throwing his hands up. “I mean, the sea’s right there. Open. Clear. Not full of ancient, ship-destroying horrors.” He waved wildly at the obvious death trap ahead. “Seriously, am I the only one seeing this?”

Annabeth turned toward him, exasperated. “No one’s ignoring the death trap, Seaweed Brain. We just don’t know what’s waiting on the other routes. We do know this one can be crossed. If we plan it right, we can make it through without losing anyone.”

“Oh, if we plan it right?” Percy scoffed. “You don’t know that. But we do *know* this will try to kill us.”

Clarisse let out an irritated growl. “Oh my gods, just *shut up*, Jackson.”

Luke barely resisted the urge to sigh.

*Children.*

Even here, in the middle of all this, problematic as ever.

He sneaked a look to the side—Dean was absolutely no help, staring at the storm from inside the captain’s cabin, pale as a ghost, like just being indoors could somehow save him if Charybdis swallowed them whole.

Tyson, meanwhile, was clinging to Percy’s shirt, his face scrunched up with fear, his single eye darting between the storm and his brother.

“Bad,” he whispered. “That is bad.”

Then Clarisse added, “We go there, and that’s *final*.”

And with that, she turned on her heel and marched away.

Annabeth’s gaze snapped back to Luke, exasperated but expectant. Because as stubborn and proud as she was, as much as she wanted to prove herself—to fix things on her own after last year—Clarisse wasn’t going to listen to her.

And between all of them, only the two of them had even the slightest chance of getting inside Clarisse’s head.

And she wasn’t listening to Annabeth.

Which meant Luke was the only one left.

*Great.*

He wasn’t Peter. But he could try.

He sighed deeply, pinching the bridge of his nose before giving Annie a curt nod, then turned to follow Clarisse. She stood by the sea, arms crossed, scowling at the waves. She didn’t turn when he stepped beside her. The only acknowledgment he got was a grumble.

“Here we go again. Come on, nag at me.”

"Clarisse," he sighed, closing his eyes, exasperated. "We’re a team. If you think this plan is the right call, then say why. Talk to us, argue your case. Let’s actually decide this together. That’s what we did when we figured out how to get here." He opened his eyes, watching the water churn. "I put out ideas, you both weighed in, and we made a call. Even if no one fought too hard about it, it was still a choice we all stood by."

Clarisse’s jaw tightened, but she stayed silent, arms crossed, staring down the storm like she could intimidate it into backing off. Not just the storm—the place where the sky met the sea

in a dark, churning mass, where the water twisted and sucked at the air.

*Charybdis.*

Luke followed her gaze, letting the silence stretch between them.

His eyes flicked past the maelstrom, toward the island looming beyond it—jagged cliffs, as tall as skyscrapers, the kind of place where shadows gathered in deep crevices, where water carved out hidden tunnels, twisting paths. And above it all, the lair of Scylla.

It was a brutal choice, but not a complicated one.

Lose six, or lose everyone.

That was the decision Odysseus had faced. And for Luke… there wasn't much of a choice at all. The shades on this ship weren't real soldiers. They only spoke, only moved because Ares had dragged them from their graves and handed them to his daughter. They were ghosts. Echoes. Already long dead. They wouldn't die again.

*His kids? Dean?*

Luke wouldn't hesitate. Not anymore.

"We could do what Odysseus did," he said at last, breaking the silence. He kept his eyes on her, watching her brow furrow, watching the shift—how her attention dragged, reluctantly, from Charybdis to the towering cliffs of Scylla's domain. "We could skirt closer to Scylla's island to avoid getting swallowed. Stay inside the captain's cabin, wait for it to pass—"

"Sacrifice the soldiers?" she cut him off, snapping toward him.

Her rust-colored eyes caught the light just so—more like her father's in that moment. A more human version, maybe, but the intensity was the same.

Then she bared her teeth in something that wasn't quite a smile.

"A *coward's* move."

"Maybe," he conceded, keeping his face neutral as he met her gaze. "But what matters more right now—pride? Or survival?" He let the words sit between them before adding, "The survival of the entire Camp. They depend on us, Clarisse. If we—"

"We'll travel *between* them," she cut him off again, scowling as her hands tightened on the railing.

Her eyes sparked with that same familiar fury, but there was something else beneath it, something Luke knew he had to drag out of her if they were ever going to get anywhere.

"We won't sacrifice anyone."

He exhaled sharply. "Clarisse, the dead are already dead."

Her glare sharpened, like he'd just spit in her face.

"They're my soldiers, Luke," she snapped. "I don't care if they're ghosts, no that they were yanked out of their graves by my dad himself—they follow me. They fight for me." Her knuckles went white against the railing. "And I don't leave my soldiers behind."

Luke studied her, then turned back to the sea. "Not even to save the ones still alive?"

Clarisse's nostrils flared, and for a second, he thought she might take a swing at him. She was breathing hard, reining herself in, holding onto that anger like a shield. But he knew her. Knew what she was really doing—masking, deflecting.

And he had to push.

"Clarisse, do you want to send us all to a sea burial?"

She bared her teeth. "Screw you, Luke."

"Dean? Me?" He paused, watching the way her fingers twitched. "Annabeth?"

That made her flinch.

It was quick—barely a flicker of hesitation—but Luke saw it.

Her jaw worked like she was biting back words, eyes burning into his like she could make him back down through sheer force of will.

But he didn't.

"Would you send the ship your father gave us to be swallowed and destroyed by Charybdis? After he even repaired it and made it—"

"I don't spit on what my dad gives me!" she barked, stepping closer like she was itching to rip his throat out. "Not the ship! Not the soldiers! Not when he was the only one who gave a damn! The only one who sent me to Camp, who made sure a satyr found me when my mom —"

She stopped so fast it was like someone had yanked her back.

Her eyes widened, breath coming in sharp, uneven pulls. She flicked a glance at him—caught the surprise on his face—then at the others a little farther away. Too far to have heard.

That fact alone seemed to settle her.

Her expression shut down like a steel trap. Her shoulders squared, fists clenched tight at her sides.

"Forget it," Clarisse muttered, voice stiff, turning back to the sea like she could toss the moment into the waves and be done with it.

Then, after a beat, she forced the words out, rough—like growling them might make her voice steadier, might hide the way her shoulders had curled in just slightly, like she was bracing for something.

But it didn't. Not really.

"We'll go in between. That's the plan. End of discussion."

They stared at each other for a moment longer, Luke at a loss for words—what could he even say? What could possibly be the right response to the… implications of what she had just let slip?

*I'm sorry, Clarisse* would only make her angrier. And yet, it was the only thing that came to mind, along with something like understanding, like sympathy—because, gods, *he got it*. His mom… he loved her, but she wasn't fit to raise a kid. Lucky him, he had never really been one. Not when this was his second life.

But Clarisse—

Clarisse was staring at him, daring him to say something, her eyes searching his face for—something. Whatever it was, she either found it or didn't, because her expression was unreadable, and Luke was too thrown off to try and decipher it.

Then she scowled, more out of habit than anything else—he could tell—and turned on her heel, marching away.

Luke didn't stop her.

He just stood there, watching as she barked out orders, her voice snapping through the air, sharp and commanding. The soldiers moved instantly, falling in line, shifting like a well-oiled machine as the ship maneuvered.

The hull groaned as it turned, waves crashing against it.

Luke took a deep breath, pressing his lips together. His hands moved to his bag without much thought, and before he even registered it, the book was in his grasp. *The Odyssey.*

His fingers traced the worn cover as he looked down at it, brows drawn together.

*I tried. I tried, and it's still going to happen just like it did in the books.*

The thought sent a rush of cold fear through him, settling deep in his bones.

*But things are different. Too different. Dean is here—he wasn't in canon. I'm here—* he swallowed hard, gripping the book tighter, *—and I'm not the enemy.*

*So if we take the same path—*

He hesitated.

He didn’t want to think about it.

But his mind did anyway.

*Will someone die?*

He cut the thought off sharply, something desperate and stubborn rising in him. With a sharp breath, he shoved *The Odyssey* back into his bag, like that alone could reject the possibility.

No.

Nothing of the sort would happen—because he wouldn’t *let* it.

And if that meant dragging Clarisse to the captain’s cabin by force? If it meant threatening every last one of those ghost soldiers to fall in line? Then fine.

He was a son of Hermes, as much as that truth was hard to swallow, as much as it still filled him with fear, resentment, all those tangled emotions he barely had the time to pick apart. But he *was* his father’s son. And his father was the *Psychopomp*, the Guide of Souls. He doubted he’d inherited even a sliver of that domain—not like Abigail—but still.

Luke was Hermes' son.

He could *try*.

He could try to command enough respect to make them listen.

With a deep breath, Luke sighed and stepped over to the others, adjusting his bag and, for once, strapping both straps over his shoulders. He settled beside Annabeth and Percy, keeping his eyes fixed ahead, lips pressed into a thin line.

Out of the corner of his eye, he caught Annabeth glancing at him before she crossed her arms and turned back to the sea.

"I take it that didn’t do much."

"It didn’t do anything," Luke corrected, brows knitting together as the ship edged closer and closer to the storm.

"She’s trying to kill us all," Percy muttered, scowling at the water like it had personally offended him. "And *I’m* the reckless one?"

"You’re not much better, Seaweed Brain," Annabeth shot back, exasperation lacing her voice. "Just *intruding* on an ongoing quest—one to the Sea of Monsters, even. You could’ve ended up as monster chow before you reached us."

Percy grumbled something in response, but Luke didn’t bother acknowledging it, too focused on the water ahead. They were getting closer to the border now, the ship slowing just enough to maneuver into position.

Luke remained tense and still as they adjusted course, slipping into the invisible line between Scylla and Charybdis. His grip tightened on his arms, fingers digging in. He hissed under his breath when he pressed too hard.

The bruises were mostly gone—he'd taken a microscopic piece of ambrosia, just enough to drain out the worst of the deep purple—but the skin was still tender. His father had made a mess of his skin, and Luke… Luke didn't want to think about that.

Didn't want to think about the fact that now his father *knew.*

Didn't want to think about what Hermes could do, what he *would* do.

Didn't want to start thinking about what *he* would have to do once the quest was over.

Would Hermes tell the other gods? Would Luke be punished? Have his memories stolen?

Or—he swallowed hard—would his father be waiting, ready to whisk him away, to lock him in some gilded birdcage only he knew of?

Luke didn't know. And the tightness in his chest, the way his breath felt just a little too shallow.

None of that mattered.

He wasn't stopping because of *that.* Not because he was feeling this way. No.

Luke *wasn't weak.*

He was simply being rational. *Yes, that was it.*

*Rational.*

There were other things to focus on. More important ones.

More *urgent* ones.

His thoughts were interrupted when the ship lurched violently beneath him. Luke barely managed to grab the railing before he was sent overboard, his other hand snapping out instinctively to grab Annabeth's shirt before she could go tumbling too.

Saltwater slammed into them, burning his eyes, making it hard to breathe as the ship groaned under the force of the waves. He coughed, blinking rapidly, his grip tightening as Annabeth sputtered beside him, clutching the railing like her life depended on it.

Percy—because of course—had already latched onto one of the masts, hugging it for dear life.

*Clarisse. Tyson. Dean.*

The thought came suddenly, panic threading through his chest. Luke whipped his head around, his hand still fisted in Annabeth's shirt, not letting go even as she steadied herself beside him.

His eyes darted frantically, searching—*Where? Where? Where?*—until he saw her.

Clarisse stood near the center of the ship, gripping her spear, the tip buried into the deck for leverage. She was shouting something—commands, probably—but Luke could barely hear her over the storm, over the howling wind and the groaning metal of the ship.

Around her, the shades moved, stumbling but obeying, running like soldiers scrambling in a battlefield.

Luke's gaze flicked to the captain's cabin.

Dean was still inside, looking terrified, his eyes too wide as he spoke quickly to Tyson, who clung to him, knuckles white.

*Good.* Even in the middle of this, Dean still had the sense to protect the younger ones. As was only fitting for a Searcher.

Luke clenched his jaw, one hand gripping the railing in a white-knuckled grip, the only thing keeping him from taking a dip in the swirling sea of death below. His other hand was locked even tighter on the back of Annabeth's shirt, refusing to let go.

His mind was in chaos.

*He knew this would happen.*

He had warned her. Had told her this was going to be a disaster, that they should have just tested their luck with Scylla. And now—

The ship lurched again, violently, and Luke let out a sharp curse, his arms and hands burning as he held on.

Then—

A scream.

His blood went cold.

He snapped his head around immediately, his mind looping in panic—*one of the kids, one of the kids is falling—*

But—

A second later, the realization hit, and for a brief, shameful moment, he didn't care.

It was one of the shades.

*Thank God it wasn't one of his brats.*

The poor dead soldier crashed against the railing, and Luke stared in some kind of distant, wide-eyed shock, as if the world had slowed to a crawl. He watched as the man lifted his head—

Then another wave slammed into them.

Saltwater burned his eyes, forcing them shut for a second, and when he blinked them open again—

The soldier was gone.

Luke sucked in a breath, whipping his head toward the edge of the ship, and what he saw made his heart almost leap out of his throat.

The shade was thrashing in the water, caught in the churning waves, trying to swim—but it was useless. The harder he fought, the more the ocean pulled him under, sucking him down like a creature with its jaws wide open.

Because that's exactly what it was.

Luke *saw it.*

*Charybdis.*

The sight struck him like a blade slamming down on a chopping block.

He watched with horrified fascination as the beast became visible beneath the churning waves, her form shifting under the storm-dark clouds that met the sea in an apocalyptic dance.

*Enormous.*

A gaping mouth, ringed with teeth—like a sea lamprey he had once seen on TV, only *massive*, so massive their ship was nothing more than a speck of dust beside it.

He watched, numb, as the soldier was dragged farther and farther away, until—

He was swallowed whole, vanishing with the water.

Luke's heart slammed against his ribs, and a primal, instinctive alarm ignited in his veins.

They had to do something.

They couldn't *possibly* win against this thing.

"Hold!" Clarisse bellowed, fury crackling in her voice. "Hold the ship! Hold the line, you maggots!"

And the shades, bless their unbeating hearts, tried to obey as best they could, drawing on all their years of experience as soldiers of this ship.

Soldiers went and came, and Luke observed it all while trying to avoid sharing the same fate as the swallowed shade—and doing his best to make sure Annabeth didn't, either. Men scrambled up the masts, men ran across the deck, men fought to steer the ship away. And to Luke's eyes, it *looked* coordinated, the shades working together, doing their best not to falter, even as the ship lurched violently from one side to the other.

But the sea didn't care.

Nor did Charybdis.

"Get the ship get back in line! You want to row straight into Charybdis, you *idiots*?" Clarisse screamed, her spear crackling with electricity as she held onto it tightly. Her veins bulged, and even from this distance, Luke could see how hard she was pushing herself—how exhausted she was getting.

Something in him noted it with a sort of panicked detachment—right before the ship rocked violently again.

But another feeling rose alongside it.

*Anger.*

Anger and incredulity surged through him, burning away the detachment that had wrapped around him like suffocating tendrils—tendrils he was far too used to. It tore through them, fire flooding his veins like a sea of wildfire, sharp and consuming, setting his nerves alight.

*The line again?*

Clarisse was still insisting on this *stupid* plan? *Still?* Even after everything happening right in front of her? Even as she saw her friends barely holding on, clinging to the ship like their lives depended on it—because they *did*—even after watching one of her own undead soldiers get swallowed into nothing?

A fate any of them could share at *any* moment?

*Her pride will be the end of us all,* Luke snarled to himself.

"No!" he shouted, forcing his voice over the crashing waves. Fury helped him here—it carried, sharp and commanding, echoing across the deck with enough force that every single person froze and turned to stare at him.

*Too slow,* his frustrated mind snapped. *Too fucking slow, like they think this is a cruise instead of standing on the brink of being swallowed by a goddamn sea monster.*

*Dumbasses.*

“Get to Scylla’s lair, you dipshits! Do you want to kill us all? What would the Lord of War think of you for failing his daughter?”

That was enough to send a ripple through the shades, every single one of them pausing, freezing up like a bunch of broken puppets receiving conflicting orders in their dead brains.

*Good.*

Luke could take control of the situation.

*Could.*

The keyword being *could*—because, of course, Clarisse had to butt in, throwing in her own unnecessary two cents and making everything more complicated than it needed to be.

“No! I’m the captain! You listen to *me*! We *stay in the line*!” she barked, instantly rebuking him, her voice sharp with authority as she whipped her head around, glaring at the shades, daring them to disobey.

Oh, for the love of God.

Luke had *no* patience for this right now.

And they could *not* be arguing—not *now*, not *here.* If they made it out of this alive, he was absolutely ripping Clarisse a new one. Hell, he’d tell Peter about it too, just so he could back him up. Because goddamn it, Clarisse was too stubborn for her own good.

*Sweet Jesus.*

The shades locked up, glancing at each other like they didn’t know what to do—like Luke mentioning Ares had flipped some kind of switch in whatever was left of their brains. Or whatever they had that still functioned as an equivalent. Luke didn’t really care to find out.

What he *did* care about was getting them to move.

And maybe—*maybe*—he could borrow another authority to make that happen.

“I’m the son of the *Psychopomp!*” he bellowed, his voice cutting through the storm, louder than Clarisse’s roar of orders. “You, soldiers—listen to *me!* Redirect the ship to Scylla’s lair! Protect the crew! *Protect the Lord of War’s daughter!”*

That did it.

The shades jolted into motion, scrambling like they had the fires of hell licking at their heels.

*Good.*

Luke sucked in a breath, forcing himself to stay grounded. *Good.* But there was no victory yet—*not* until they were through this, *not* until every single one of them made it out alive.

No one was dying today.

Not if Luke had anything to say about it.

And he *did.*

He'd spit in the face of the Fates themselves if that's what it took.

Because by the grace of God, he was getting them through this.

Hauling Annabeth after him—who, for once in her life, didn't protest—Luke marched toward the captain's cabin. Or at least, as close to a march as he could manage, trying to keep his footing steady as the ship lurched violently beneath him, dragging his stomach along with it.

He really wasn't made for sea travel, but now wasn't the time to focus on how badly he wanted to throw up. There were more pressing concerns.

So he forced himself forward. Forced his wobbly legs to stay steady, his back to stay straight like steel. Forced himself to push through the nausea, through the way the ship bucked under him like it was trying to throw them all into the sea.

And he did.

He kept moving, sparing a sharp glance at Percy—who, thankfully, got the message. Without a word, Percy peeled himself off the mast he'd been clinging to and scrambled after them.

Luke silently counted—*two with him, Dean had Tyson. Good.* That meant he only had one more problem to handle before they were all safe inside.

Clarisse.

His eyes sharpened. He was going to need both hands free for that fight—no distractions, no worrying about the other brats.

Getting Clarisse inside was going to be about as easy as prying a piece of meat from a hungry lion's jaws.

Pushing the two *less* troublesome brats—because at this point, none of them were easy—Luke dropped his bag to the ground, rolled his shoulders, and gave a sharp, final order.

"Stay here. No matter what."

He didn't wait for an answer. He had more important things to deal with—like dragging the most stubborn, super-powered pain in his ass into the cabin.

And he already knew force was going to be involved, because reasoning with Clarisse? Yeah. That wasn't happening.

She was already staring at him with an unfriendly glint in her eye, her face set in a deep scowl—like it had been sculpted from clay and left to dry that way.

*What a problematic girl. Sangue de Jesus tem poder*,* Luke cursed silently, slowly circling her for an opening.

Clarisse moved in sync, shifting with him, making sure he never left her line of sight.

"Clarisse La Rue, *get inside*," Luke ordered, his voice sharp and firm, fully aware—and already exhausted by the fact—that she wasn't going to listen.

Sure enough, the brat scoffed, rolling her shoulders before gripping her spear and hauling it off the ground, eyes narrowing like she was getting ready for a fight.

"Make me," she uttered slowly, tilting her chin in the most obnoxiously defiant way possible.

*The audacity.*

Luke wasn't paid enough for this—actually, scratch that. He wasn't paid at all. And yet, somehow, here he was, wrangling demigod brats like it was his divine punishment.

But if she wanted it—

"As you wish," he said simply before lunging forward without warning, moving as fast as he could to catch her off guard and end this before they lost any more time.

Clarisse narrowed her eyes, jaw tightening as she watched him close in, forcing her limbs to move fast enough to meet him.

Still too slow.

Luke was already on her before she could even shift her spear into a ready stance, using his momentum to kick it out of her grip. No way was he letting her use that thing—he wasn't about to let this *stupid* wrestling match turn into something more serious.

To her credit, though, she didn't flinch.

She knew his tricks—had studied them since she was a little brat watching him spar with Peter, absorbing every move, every feint. And later, when she was older and could finally fight him for real, she'd learned even more.

But knowing his tricks and countering them were two entirely different scenarios.

He feinted, lifting a hand like he was about to grab her by the collar. As expected, Clarisse reacted instinctively—turning her torso, hands snapping up to counter the grab.

Then she realized.

Her eyes widened just a fraction.

*Too late.*

Luke stepped into her space, hooked his leg around hers, and—

*Pulled.*

Instantly, she lost her balance. For half a second, she flailed like a raging boar skidding on ice. And that was all the opening Luke needed.

He dropped his torso, drove his shoulder into her stomach, grabbed the back of her legs, and hauled her off the ground in one swift movement.

*Job done successfully,* he told himself, gritting his teeth through the sharp punches slamming into his back. And the floating spear, trailing after him like some gaudy, electric demon dog.

And God, did the pummeling hurt.

Clarisse wasn't pulling back *at all*, fists slamming into him with full force as she thrashed like a wild animal, all while screaming obscenities at the top of her lungs.

"Fucking bastard! Let me down so I can kill you!"

Luke ignored her with the patience of a veteran babysitter who had long since lost the will to live after enduring his hundredth tantrum.

He marched into the captain's cabin, suffering through the entire ordeal of being beaten half to death by a brat way stronger than what should be legally allowed, all while deliberately ignoring the stares the others were giving him.

But he got her inside.

And that was all that mattered.

Clarisse was safe with the rest of them.

Very gently—but *not really*—Luke dropped her onto the floor, cutting off her rant about how his bloodline should be cursed for all eternity or whatever halfway through. She let out a sharp grunt as she hit the ground, and for a blissful, glorious second, there was silence.

Then—

"Looks like the great captain is back," Percy quipped from where he stood near Tyson.

Clarisse bolted upright instantly, eyes locking onto him with a glare sharp enough to kill.

Luke shut it down before she could so much as spit out an insult.

"Silence, Percy Jackson."

The fish brat snapped his mouth shut immediately.

Luke leveled them all with the firmest stare he could manage, arms crossing as he spoke in a tone that left no room for argument.

“We’re crossing Scylla’s lair, and *all of us*—” he shot a pointed look at Clarisse, who responded with a dark scowl, “—are staying *inside* while the shades handle the deck.”

“Are you sacrificing them?” Percy asked, something in his expression twitching.

Luke resisted the urge to sigh.

“They’re already dead, Percy.” His gaze swept over the group before settling back on him. “We’re alive. So tell me—who do you want to save? The dead or the living?”

Percy’s face twisted with conflict as he stared at Luke, then at Annabeth and Tyson, his gaze slowly sweeping over everyone in the room. But he didn’t protest any further, and Luke took that as acceptance—*good enough.*

They didn’t have time for arguments.

They barely had time *at all.*

And Luke had to make sure they all got out of this alive. *All of them.*

“In *The Odyssey,* Odysseus sacrificed six men,” Annabeth said slowly. “Then they managed to cross alive.”

“A coward’s move,” Clarisse muttered under her breath—but loud enough that Luke knew she wanted to be heard.

He suppressed the urge to roll his eyes.

“Not a coward,” Annabeth shot back immediately, her face full of righteous indignation over a man who had been dead for eons—and was probably living his best afterlife in Elysium. “Odysseus was a clever warrior, and he was one of my mother’s favorite heroes! And Luke’s not stupid either—he’s doing the same thing.”

“Enough,” Luke said sharply, his voice cutting through the room. He leveled both girls with a glare, making them tense and glance away.

Dragging a hand down his face, he exhaled and dropped into a creaky old chair. Nearby, Dean was nervously munching on a metal Coke can, barely sparing him a glance. His friend looked rattled, and honestly, Luke didn’t blame him. Their situation was *shit.*

“We stay here until the coast is clear. That’s final.”

No one argued.

And for a brief moment, Luke could almost fool himself into thinking things might actually go smoothly.

But who was he kidding?

These brats had *zero* survival instinct—while one brat-that-wasn't-really-a-brat had *too much* of it. And Luke got it. He really did. He was cut from the same cloth.

But none of that mattered. They didn't have a choice.

And even if they did, his luck had never existed in the first place.

So, no—he wasn't holding out much hope at all.

Chapter End Notes

*Sangue de Jesus tem poder - blood of Jesus has power

So—Charybdis.

They're here. Luke has a plan, Clarisse has a much less safe one, and Percy thinks he knows what's going on... but doesn't. Basically, conflict is brewing like a bomb with a very short fuse.

Also—Clarisse backstory alert! After how many chapters? Doesn't matter. What matters is: she's got issues. Her dad is a god, but at least he's one who actually did something to her, so we've got this deep, slightly warped sense of loyalty going on. Ares wouldn't care about sacrificing dead soldiers—they're echoes, not lives—but Clarisse won't go against what her father gives her. Even if it's the wrong call. Add in a warrior's honor code (you can thank Peter for that; he infected her), and yeah. She's not backing down.

As always, thank you so much for commenting! I read every single one, even if I don't reply right away (but I always get to it eventually!).

So, what do you think? Will the Scylla plan work out—or are we about to hit the fan at terminal velocity?

# Chapter 58: SoM - Scylla

Chapter Summary

The demigod kids fuck everything up (Annabeth excluded—she actually listened)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"I'm holding a boundary, Percy," Luke said patiently, trying to focus as Percy hovered nearby, watching him with those way-too-bright sea-green eyes—narrowed, watchful.

Honestly, it was kind of annoying.

But he couldn't blame the kid too much. They were all crammed into this tiny room together—all of them. He shot a quick side glance at Clarisse, who was scowling in the corner.

Even the bratty ones.

Especially now, with the ship drawing closer and closer to Scylla's lair. Luke could feel it—his inner compass honing in on its exact location like a needle locking onto true north.

Still, the kids—who all had far too much energy for his liking—had started finding ways to distract themselves. And in Percy's case, that apparently meant pestering him.

Luke had settled in the center of the room, summoning a boundary—a small one this time. He wasn't about to make the same mistake as before and try covering the whole ship, not here, not now. Getting drained again in the middle of this mess would be the pinnacle of stupidity.

And, of course, Percy had decided this was the most interesting thing happening in the room, peppering Luke with endless questions and completely unasked for commentary—mostly about their last spar, like some overenthusiastic sports announcer who had no idea when to shut up.

Like right now.

"So, this was what you used during Capture the Flag? When the waves didn't reach you, I mean," Percy asked, tilting his head, eyes narrowing as he flicked his gaze between Luke and the barely-there shimmer on the walls—something only noticeable if you were really paying attention.

Which, of course, the fish brat was.

Really, Percy was too observant at times—good instincts, Luke thought with reluctant approval, even if he still felt exasperated. It would keep the kid alive.

But also… well, Luke couldn't make the shimmer disappear. Not yet.

Apparently, according to *Mercury* at least, boundaries were supposed to be transparent—practically invisible. A sign of mastery or some other backhanded advice the leech had oh-so-helpfully provided while sighing in disappointment.

Implying Luke was bad at it.

Luke didn't need to be told outright to catch the implication.

*Clown.*

"Yes, I summoned a small one to cover me," Luke said, stretching his neck slightly, feeling the strain of holding the boundary. Even a small one like this—at least compared to covering the whole ship—was taxing. But it was manageable, thank God.

"Just barely over my skin to keep from getting swept up by the water."

Tilting his head lazily, so one eye flicked toward Percy, Luke smirked. "But the little prince of the sea has no need for such tricks, does he? The ocean is his palace."

Percy immediately pulled a face, scrunching his nose like he'd just bitten into something sour. "I'm not a prince, I'm just Percy."

Classic. Daddy issues—Camp Half-Blood had an epidemic of those. Luke would know.

Even with how much Percy clearly wanted Poseidon's attention, he also bristled at the implications, and that was a feeling all too common at Camp. Luke had seen it more times than he cared to count over the years—Percy wasn't unique in that. The difference was who his dad was. One of the most powerful gods in the Greek pantheon, an Olympian, a name that carried weight even among the divine.

So, no. Not quite the same situation.

Percy's expression softened a moment later, curiosity overtaking his irritation. "But… how do you do that? Is this boundary to avoid, you know—" he hesitated, fumbling for the right words. "Drowning and stuff?"

Luke snorted despite himself, shooting Percy an amused look. "No, kid. This is to keep us from being detected by Scylla."

Rolling his shoulders back, he shifted slightly, his tone turning more serious. "I'm assuming that, like most monsters, she's drawn to our scent. I'm trying to block that—and add some actual protection in case she comes after us anyway."

Which, honestly, seemed like the smart call. Scylla was a monster—one with all the usual perks, including the highly inconvenient ability to sniff out demigods like blood in the water.

And there were four of them packed into this room.

Luke's gaze swept across the cabin, taking them in—four demigods, plus a satyr and a cyclops. A beacon of monster bait if there ever was one.

He had to prioritize. This was the immediate threat. Drowning was a secondary problem—one that, hopefully, wouldn't happen.

So he kept the boundary focused on what mattered most.

Still, he couldn't help but grimace. The strain was creeping in, the boundary leeching at his strength, his limbs growing heavier even though he was just sitting still. He'd been holding it for a while now, and it was starting to catch up to him.

But he endured.

This wasn't as bad as covering the whole ship—or so he kept telling himself as exhaustion curled around him, sinking its claws in deeper.

He had to protect the brats. And Dean. He had to protect all of them.

And right now, he was the only one who could do something about it.

So he did.

"…It's a work in progress," he muttered under his breath. "And adding anti-drowning measures? That'd be pushing it."

Percy furrowed his brows, staring at him with an intensity that felt too heavy for a kid his age. Then the moment cracked, and he was back to being the fish brat Luke knew—shuffling uncomfortably, like he wanted to say something but either couldn't figure out how or was too wary of what Luke's reaction would be.

Silly boy.

"Out with it," Luke said casually, flicking his gaze to Dean, who—for the fourth time—was pulling out a Coke can, staring at it like it was his last hope before shaking his head and shoving it back into his bag, looking thoroughly conflicted the entire time.

Very entertaining.

Percy shifted again, the drag of his feet against the floor just barely audible before he finally worked up the nerve to speak.

"…Are you tired?" The words came out hesitant, like they had to be dragged from his throat.

Then, as if realizing how that sounded, he scrambled to cover it up.

"I mean, you're strong, but you've been doing this for a while, and… this seems kinda exhausting."

Then his face perked up, like a lightbulb had gone off in his head. “When I control water, I get really tired too, so… I thought—”

“I’m fine, Percy,” Luke interrupted with a small smile, sparing him from the awkward tumble of words—a mercy, really, considering how red his face had gotten. The kid was clearly embarrassed, and Luke wasn’t about to make it worse.

“What matters most is that we make it through this in one piece—so we can get the Fleece and bring Grover back.”

“But—”

Whatever Percy had been about to say was cut off as the ship lurched violently, shaking all of them with it. Luke, seated in the center of the room, barely managed to keep himself steady. He heard Percy curse as he lost his footing, hitting the floor hard—like something massive had just latched onto the ship and pulled.

“By the Dread Queen…” Dean whispered, clutching his bag tightly to his chest. Beside him, Tyson crept closer, his single eye wide, already brimming with tears.

Clarisse bolted upright from where she had been wallowing in frustration, a snarl already forming on her lips. But the tension in her frame, the way her hands curled into fists, and the wary glance she shot toward the front door made it clear—she wasn’t just angry.

On the other side of the room, Annabeth—who had swiped Luke’s copy of *The Odyssey*—slowly lifted her head, her lips pressing into a thin line. Her brows furrowed so tightly that her forehead creased, making her look far older than she was.

She turned her gaze to Luke, tense—too young, they were all too young—and mouthed the name.

Luke nodded grimly.

He already knew.

He didn’t need to see it to be sure. He didn’t even need to check his internal GPS, which was practically blaring that they were exactly where they should be.

He had faced enough sea monsters on this cursed trip to recognize the telltale weight of something enormous dragging them down.

*Scylla.*

The name settled in his mind like a cold weight as he steeled himself, leaning forward and pressing his palms firmly against the ground, pulling inward, tightening his grip on the boundary with everything he had. He couldn’t let it slip. He wouldn’t let it slip.

They would not be detected.

It would hold.

He'd make sure of it.

"Don't." The command left his mouth before he even realized it, sharp and unwavering, addressing the room at large while his focus stayed locked on the door. Sweat dripped down the back of his neck from the doubled effort, but he didn't waver.

"Don't leave this room. No matter what."

"But my soldiers—" Clarisse snapped, whipping her head toward him, jaw clenched, her mouth twisting in frustration.

Luke wasn't having it.

*Not now. Especially not now.*

"Nobody," he repeated, voice calm, his movements slow as he turned to look at her. His face was blank, but his eyes were serious—final. He was done, so done with this.

"Will leave this room. Do you understand, Clarisse La Rue?"

Her whole form tensed as she locked eyes with him, shoulders squared like she was debating whether to hurl another insult at him or just take a swing out of sheer frustration.

But eventually, she forced herself to breathe—once, twice, thrice—then gave a single nod.

*Good.*

Luke would take any sign of compliance he could get. He had no patience left for kids trying to get themselves killed for sport—not a single drop.

The situation was *critical.*

And—for a time—they listened.

Listened until the sounds outside crept in. Until the screaming began. Until they heard the groan of metal twisting, the splinter of wood crushed under weight, the crack of bullets—

The snarl of something monstrous—

And then, worst of all, a shriek that echoed like laughter.

High. Feminine.

*Wrong.*

Scylla was here, and she was already on her bloodbath.

Did shades even have blood? Did they leave bones behind, or did they just disintegrate like monsters? Maybe they slipped back into the shadows, the way hellhounds did. Luke didn't know. Didn't care.

What mattered was the boundary. And he held it.

He sat on the floor, braced against the ground, sweat dripping down his temple as the sounds raged outside—the screams, the snarling, the twisted crunch of metal and wood, the crackle of gunfire. He could feel the pressure against the edge of the barrier, feel the danger pressing in from all sides, but it held. It held everyone inside this room. Everyone still breathing.

His world narrowed to that single, desperate focus: keep them hidden. Keep them safe.

He held the boundary.

Held it until—

"That's it—I'm not sitting here while my soldiers get torn apart!" Clarisse's voice sliced through the air like a blade, sharp and furious.

Luke's head jerked up. "No, Clarisse! Don't—"

Too late.

She'd already grabbed her spear and was charging the door. Lightning sparked at the tip before Luke could even stand.

No.

*No, no, no.*

Stupid, reckless, stubborn—

He half-stumbled to his feet, fingers twitching with helpless rage as his mind scrambled for any way to undo what had just happened—

"Luke," Percy said, quiet but steady.

Luke turned. The kid was staring at him, eyes too serious for someone his age, too full of that heroic spark Luke hated seeing.

"We should help," Percy said.

"Then you'll die," Luke snapped, straightening and glaring down at Percy with a deep frown, too rattled, too furious to bother softening the words.

*Stupid.*

These kids were too stupid.

They were safe—all of them—they just had to stay inside, wait out the pass through Scylla's lair, block out the screams and pretend they weren't happening.

That was all.

Luke dragged a hand down his face, breathing hard through his teeth before shoving Percy out of the way and storming toward the door. His eyes locked onto the chaos beyond, wide and frantic, his heart pounding as he tried to keep sight of Clarisse. His mind was still spiraling, too full—too loud—and the worst part was, he had no idea how to stop any of it.

He watched. Ignored Percy standing beside him, stiff with uncertainty. Ignored Annabeth slowly closing her book, the muttering under her breath fading as she approached, steps light on the floor. Ignored Dean's quiet voice as he whispered reassurance to Tyson—whose voice, small and trembling, barely managed to ask if they were going to be okay. A child's voice. Too young.

Luke focused on the battlefield.

Clarisse fought like a war god's fury made flesh. Her spear sliced through the air, lightning exploding from its tip, and her soldiers—those dead, obedient shadows—closed ranks around her. She moved like a storm, like death given form, like she was trying to take Scylla down with nothing but rage and stubbornness.

And each flash of her weapon lit up the surroundings.

For a heartbeat at a time, the shape of something came into view—hulking, massive. Too big. With too many teeth.

"She's going to die at this rate," Luke murmured, barely aware he was speaking. His fingers tapped frantically against his thigh, his eyes flickering from her, to the kids still behind him, to the boundary he could barely maintain.

The monster loomed.

"Fuck," he hissed. "Stubborn boar child. She'll be the end of us all."

Luke tried to think, but his mind was blank, his pulse pounding like a storm trapped under his skin, desperate to break loose.

Clarisse.

She was still out there—still fighting.

But if he left, the boundary would fall. The others would be exposed. All of them.

And then what? They'd all die.

*What do I do?*

The question rang through his skull, useless and urgent, as sweat slid down the back of his neck.

His gaze locked on Clarisse—the way she lunged, slashed, lightning tearing through the air like a war cry. Her soldiers rallied around her, silent and fierce. And the monster—Jesus, the monster loomed. He saw it only in glimpses, but it was enough: sinuous necks writhing like a

hydra's spawn, heads snapping down with rows of jagged teeth, eyes that gleamed with cold hunger. Six of them—there were always six. Each time lightning cracked, a different head struck from the shadows. The air was full of screeching—a shriek like laughter, high and cruel and unmistakably female.

*Wrong.*

*So wrong.*

Luke's chest tightened.

He remembered another flash of lightning. A different girl. One who barely had a chance to live—and might have a second one, if they survived this.

*What do I do?*

He stood frozen, trapped between two hard decisions, mind scrambling toward a plan—

And then—

"We can't just let her fight that thing alone!"

"Percy—" Luke snapped, his voice razor-sharp, fury coiling tight in his chest. That stupid, reckless, suicidal fish brat—

But Percy was already gone. He ducked low, slipped past him with practiced ease—he'd learned Luke's moves too well—and bolted straight into the fray, Riptide uncapped, its bronze glow lighting up the cave like a signal flare.

Luke caught the glint in the dark.

Fuck.

*Fuck, fuck, fuck.*

He froze for just a second, then shut his eyes and exhaled through his teeth. When he opened them again, the decision was made. He let go. The barrier snapped out of existence.

He turned, gaze sweeping the room in a single, measured glance. Annabeth stood just a step away, *The Odyssey* closed in her hands, her eyes sharp, unreadable. Behind her, Dean stood tense and pale, one hand braced against Tyson's arm. The cyclops loomed over him, clutching a handful of twisted metal like a comfort item, his big brown eye glassy with tears.

"Bad noises," he muttered. "Very bad. Is Luke going to fix it?"

*I don't know if I can fix this, kid,* Luke thought, heart clenching even as he forced a reassuring smile. Tyson was a child—too young to understand the kind of danger they were in. But Luke didn't have the strength to comfort him, not now.

So he looked to Dean instead.

Dean met his gaze and gave a sharp nod, already murmuring quietly to Tyson as he gently steered him toward the back of the cabin, as far from the door as possible. “Hey, big guy, it’s okay. We’re gonna be fine. We’ll be riding fish ponies before you know it—”

Luke turned away, jaw tight, his eyes flicking back to Annabeth. She was still there, still watching, book clutched tight in her hands.

“Annabeth,” he said, voice flat, all sharp edge and no heat, “we’re fighting.”

He moved to his bag and pulled out his sword with practiced hands, body wound tight, every step exact.

She didn’t flinch.

“In the book, Scylla took six men without warning,” Annabeth said quickly, voice low but clear. “Odysseus never even saw her. Just sailed too close to her rock—and she struck.”

Her gaze flicked to the door. “Clarisse isn’t being targeted. Not yet. Everyone’s still clustered together. But now there are two demigods outside.”

A beat. Then:

“Percy ran straight into the open.”

Luke’s jaw clenched. *Of course* he did. Stupid, reckless fish brat—charging ahead without a single thought in that seaweed-soaked head of his. A demigod’s scent was already a death sentence, but a Big Three kid? He was practically gift-wrapped and glowing.

“Then we need to move. Now.”

Annabeth gave a brisk nod, slipping the book back into her bag and pulling out her celestial bronze knife. It wasn’t going to do much against something the size of Scylla, but Luke figured it was better she had something sharp in hand.

She’d always favored knives over swords—never quite took to them, no matter how many times he tried to convince her otherwise. A shame, really. Still, he’d taught her enough to drop a man and castrate him in under two minutes.

That would have to be enough.

“We confuse her with our scent,” Luke said as he stepped out, Annabeth close behind. His eyes were already sweeping the deck, searching for the two problems causing all of this. “We’re not trying to kill her, just get past. If we can get Clarisse and Percy back inside, I can raise the boundary again—”

“And hold it until we pass,” Annabeth finished. “But I doubt we’ll get that lucky.”

“No,” Luke agreed, exhaling. “Me neither.”

His gaze caught Percy in the distance—just in time to see the kid barely dodge a sudden lunge, a shape far too large moving through the darkness. Percy hit the deck in a roll, Riptide flashing in his grip.

Luke's stomach turned. But the brat was still alive. For now.

"I think we'll be lucky if we keep those two alive long enough to scream at them later," he muttered, already moving.

"We split up and keep dodging. No chance they'll listen now." Annabeth's voice was clipped, focused—her gray eyes scanned the deck, cataloguing every possible angle. Luke could see the calculations behind her gaze. He was used to it.

"We cover them—go get Percy, drag him back if you have to," he said, eyes narrowing into the dark as every hair on his arms stood on end. "I'll draw her attention this way."

A pause.

"Be careful, Annie. Stay alive."

"You too."

Then they moved, separating without another word.

Luke darted toward a corner of the deck where no one else had gone, eyes straining against the dark. He tried to read the shadows, squinting, breath tight.

Then something moved.

A massive shadow lunged from above, silent as death. Luke didn't think—he pivoted, slipping to the side with practiced grace just as enormous jaws snapped shut in the space where he'd just been.

Would've torn him clean in half, he noted distantly, heart pounding like a war drum.

And in that split second—so close he could smell the rot—he saw it.

A single golden eye, soulless, staring at him as the shape crept back into the dark. Doglike—a mangy mutt, black as sin, snarling, lined with too many sharp teeth. Ravenous. Luke could see it in every trembling muscle.

It was terrifying. It was—fuck. Luke was scared.

But he was here.

Clarisse was still in the thick of it, spitting curses in the middle of her undead soldiers like sheer rage could kill a monster. Percy was darting around, slashing at shadows, and Annabeth was doing her best to rein him in. And inside, Tyson and Dean were waiting—counting on them to survive this.

Luke had a job to do.

He had to draw attention. Had to become the target. And even though every nerve in his body screamed to run, to throw up a boundary and curl into a ball with his hands over his ears—he didn't.

He stayed.

Still. Silent. A single demigod alone on the deck.

*Bait.*

He swallowed, tightening his grip on the hilt of his sword, watching as those ravenous golden eyes vanished into the dark—dragged backward like a puppet on strings. His pulse thundered, but he didn't move.

He couldn't afford to.

He just had to stay long enough. Long enough for them to get through. Long enough for Scylla to strike at him—and not the kids.

And he didn't have to wait long.

A beat.

A moment where the sounds around him seemed to vanish, where his focus tunneled in on the dark—and then it happened.

A head descended.

Luke threw himself out of the way, heart thundering, jaw clenched tight. He barely had time to breathe before the back of his neck prickled again. He dove sideways just as another head lunged, snarling.

*Two.* Two enormous, mangy mutts—black as ash, wild-eyed and foaming—glared at him with golden, soulless eyes. But just two of the six.

Luke didn't blink.

He adjusted his stance slowly, steadying his grip on the sword, eyes fixed on the threat. He didn't move—not yet. He had to hold their attention. Had to keep the monster focused on him.

The stench was overwhelming. Their breath was putrid, sour with rot and death, the smell of wild things long abandoned by the world. They looked like strays gone rabid, the kind of creature people crossed the street to avoid—if they were lucky enough to get the chance.

Feral. Hungry.

And locked onto him.

He barely dared to breathe. Barely dared to blink. His lungs burned, his eyes dry, but he didn't move. Couldn't. Not yet.

Ladon flickered in his mind—Ladon with his thousand heads, all snapping at once, a forest of fangs and fury. He remembered leaping over them, weaving between them, never landing a hit, just surviving. That had been the only victory possible. Not killing. Escaping.

He had done it before. He could do it again.

Two heads. He could manage two.

But four were still free. Four not locked on him.

*Four that could turn on the kids.*

His pulse pounded, a drumbeat in his skull. His sword was slick in his grip. He swallowed hard.

One breath slipped out—shaky, quiet, but loud enough in this death-thick dark.

The heads snapped up.

And lunged.

And Luke couldn't think anymore—only survive.

He twisted, body folding low to the deck, his breath caught in his throat. He moved like water, like instinct, keeping close to the ground, never giving the heads a full target. He couldn't jump—air made you slow. Made you vulnerable. There were still four heads he hadn't seen yet.

Worse than Ladon.

Ladon had been a beast in full view, a monstrous tree of writhing necks, a known horror. This? This was a serpent buried in the dark, hidden in the grass, striking from places you didn't know to fear until the teeth closed in.

Luke bent and twisted, joints screaming, muscles taut as bowstrings. He felt the breath of rot graze his cheek, a gust of heat and decay. Felt the snap of wind against his back where a jaw had just missed.

He moved like a dancer, like a shadow, like prey that knew it was one breath away from being devoured. A dance of death.

And he wasn't done dancing yet.

The world narrowed to teeth, shadows, and the breath of rot. Everything else—Percy's shouting, Annabeth's footsteps, the hiss of lightning from Clarisse's spear—faded into a distant hum. His focus tunneled. Nothing existed but survival.

He didn't let himself drift from the corner he'd claimed. He couldn't. Stray too far, and he'd draw the monsters closer to the others. And with Percy smelling like a feast, Annabeth trying to hold him back, and Clarisse practically daring death to strike—Luke couldn't afford to risk it.

Then—

A scream of alarm. Curses hurled into the air. Enough that Luke almost—almost—broke rhythm. His momentum faltered for half a heartbeat, and in that heartbeat, the jaws came.

He twisted just in time. Teeth snapped inches from his nose, breath like death flooding his face.

His heart slammed against his ribs, cold fear racing down his spine. If he'd been even a second slower—just one inch closer—

*Jesus Christ.*

But he was alive.

Luke shoved the fear down, crushed it beneath instinct and will. He was alive—and the kids —

He moved.

A burst of speed, retreating fast, putting distance between himself and the dog heads that had gone still. Watching. Hungry. Soulless.

He didn't turn his back on them, just shifted, just enough to glance over his shoulder. Every hair on his body stood on end, nerves screaming.

The threat was still near. Still there. Still hunting.

But his mind was already snapping to the others. His kids. His brats.

*They needed him.*

They were running across the deck, wild and uncoordinated.

Annabeth had that pinched, razor-sharp look she wore when she was calculating ten steps ahead, her eyes flicking rapidly, tracking threats, escape paths, angles. Percy was beside her, wide-eyed but stubborn, swinging Riptide while darting like a cornered animal. Shadows lashed out like serpents, striking and missing, forcing them into a jagged, desperate zigzag.

Clarisse—

"Fucking mutated mutt! I'll kill you and bring your head to my father!" she roared, lightning sparking off her spear. Her undead soldiers clustered around her in a defensive ring, fending off whatever tried to break through.

And then Luke saw it.

Not a head. Not a flash of teeth.

*Her.*

Scylla.

Not the writhing dog heads—no, the center. The humanoid body. The woman. Beautiful. Beautiful in a way that made Luke's stomach twist. Wrong, uncanny. Her face was ageless, delicate and symmetrical and utterly out of place on a monster.

And she was smiling.

Soft. Serene. Delighted.

Like this wasn't a slaughter.

Like she was pleased to see them.

"Demigods," she said, her voice soft—too soft. It overlapped itself, like a record skipping, like something pretending to speak but not quite knowing how. Not human. Not right.

"And four of you."

Her smile stretched wider, delicate and wrong, like this was a polite visit. Like they were having tea.

"What a surprise."

Luke's body went cold. *No.* This wasn't how it was supposed to go. She was supposed to stay on her rock, hidden in some crevice of the cave, striking like a blade in the dark and vanishing again. Not this. Not seen.

But there were four demigods here. Four strong scents, each one reeking of divinity and youth and power, and he was certain they smelled like a banquet to the thing wearing a woman's face.

*All of this could've been avoided if they'd just stayed inside the fucking boundary—*

He cursed under his breath, eyes flicking between the main body—still smiling that serene, bone-chilling smile—and the two dog heads in front of him, panting like they couldn't wait to tear him apart.

"A child of the Sea," she said slowly, the words rolling off her tongue like she was tasting them for the first time. Her head tilted at an unnatural angle—too far, like a broken doll's, the joints not quite right. "How rare. It's been years. How long again? I don't know. So long."

She sighed, but it wasn't human. It was the moment before a storm breaks, the breathless hush before the sky splits open.

“Such a strong scent,” she murmured. “Like a siren’s call. Irresistible. But difficult. Yes. Yes. Difficult.”

Her head tilted the other way now, as if her neck had no bones, as if she were stitched together by something that had never seen a human body.

“But this one…” Her void-like black eyes slid toward Percy. “This one is young.”

No.

*No, no, no.*

*Fuck.*

Luke tensed, body shifting ever so slightly, and the two dog heads nearest to him mirrored the movement, their snarls deepening. His breath caught.

Fuck, fuck, fuck, Percy—

His mind snapped to calculations, cold and fast. Percy was on the other side of the deck, near the edge, Annabeth corralling him closer to the waterline, smart—she knew he could fight best in that element. Good.

They were diametrically opposed.

If Luke ran now, he could make it in time. He was fast. So fast.

But those two heads—still watching him, coiled like springs—wouldn’t let him go without snapping first.

And the others.

The rest of the heads were fully visible now, looming like twisted knights of the apocalypse, rising above the ship with teeth that gleamed like blades. One head opened its jaws and Luke saw three rows of teeth—gleaming, hungry, ready.

Poised.

He was just one demigod.

*Boundary,* his mind screamed. *Summon one. Now.*

But he couldn’t.

The one he’d cast earlier had been enough to shield the kids in a tight group. Barely. It was small and specific, anchored to the cabin. To do that again now, with all of them scattered, out in the open—he’d need something bigger. Broader. Stronger.

Too much. Too draining. He knew. He remembered.

And if he passed out now, it was over.

He clenched his jaw so hard it hurt.

A beat.

“Young,” Scylla murmured again, the word dripping from her mouth like venom wrapped in honey. Her voice was low, lilting—almost beautiful. Almost. Like a song sung by the sea itself, laced with everything that made the ocean monstrous. “Soft. Ripe.”

She inhaled, savoring and deep, like a creature smelling blood in the water. “It’s been so long since I’ve tasted something warm. Something alive.”

Her lips peeled back into a grin too wide, too monstrous to be anything but wrong. “And this is special. Yes. A gift. I’m so very, *very* hungry.”

That was the only warning they got before the dog heads came down again, shaking the ship with their fury. All six, foaming at the mouth, snarling, teeth flashing like blades. One sank its jaws into the mast, jerking its head side to side, and Luke heard the groan of wood and metal under strain. It held—for now. Maybe Ares’ blessing had reinforced it.

But how long could it last?

The other heads descended like judgment. Heaven’s wrath—or hell’s beasts—let loose.

Luke saw one snap a shade clean out off the deck and hurl it into the air, jaws slamming shut mid-fall. The shade burst into shadow—but not before its bones dropped, clattering across the deck like discarded toys.

Clarisse held her ground—of course she did—but the shades, bless their empty skulls and sharper instincts, had formed a wall around her. Undead shields, thick as a phalanx. Between the daughter of their lord and the monster.

But the other heads weren’t done.

The two near Luke snapped once more at him before losing interest, something more tantalizing drawing them away.

No.

They were after Percy now.

Luke couldn’t let that happen.

“Fuck,” he breathed, breaking into a sprint. His eyes locked on the scene ahead—on the way the heads moved like a pack, coordinated, hunting. Zeroed in.

Percy was doing his best—dear God, the kid was trying. He darted across the deck like a cornered fish, squirming, zigzagging, slashing with Riptide when he had the chance. Every hit landed came with a howl, heads crashing into the deck or the mast, sending tremors through the entire ship.

Annabeth was right there with him, caught in the storm just by being close. She shouted instructions between each dodge, striking in the narrow gaps with her knife—never deep, never reckless. Just enough to draw attention. Just enough to help.

God help him. His brats.

Luke ran harder. *He had to save his brats.*

Chaos reigned—snarling jaws, screams echoing, the ship groaning under the weight of desperation and survival. Lightning split the dark like divine judgment, and through it all, Scylla's voice drifted like a lullaby. Soft. Sweet. *Wrong.*

And still, Luke ran.

Percy made a mistake—a head came from above, the kid looking up, wide-eyed, too slow, too small—

Luke descended like one of God's own generals, his sword a streak of bronze in the air. The blade arced low, precise, catching just beneath the creature's jaw. A dog's scream split the chaos, guttural and sharp, and a second shriek followed—higher, haunting, unnatural. Scylla's. The sound rattled in his skull as the blade tore through flesh, something warm and wet splashing across his chest.

It wasn't blood. Or maybe it was. He didn't care to check. But it soaked the front of his shirt all the same.

Briefly, Luke wondered, *how strange, for a creature that dies in dust to bleed like the living.*

The head crashed down with a sickening thud, whining and convulsing as it slammed into the deck, leaving a dent in the hull. Then it stilled.

Not gone. But not moving.

Luke seized Percy by the back of his shirt. "Don't freeze, brat—unless you want to die."

Percy's eyes were too wide, too full of that look Luke recognized—the kind you get when death brushes past you close enough to kiss. But they didn't have time for dissociation.

"Annabeth!" Luke shouted, yanking Percy by the collar and shoving him aside. "She's targeting him now—we can't distract her with scent anymore!"

Another head came down hard, jaws snapping where Percy had just been. Luke barely leapt back in time, his body tensed, sword up. The heads were more focused now.

*Wary.*

*Smarter.*

*Learning.*

And Luke could feel her eyes on them. The woman in the dark, head tilted like a broken doll. She wailed like a specter, the sound echoing off the cavern walls, slipping under his skin.

“Cruel, cruel,” she moaned, voice warping on itself, fractured like cracked glass. “Pain. So much pain. I can’t feel it anymore…”

“It didn’t even work!” Annabeth yelled, already moving, dragging Percy behind her with one arm. Her eyes were sharp, calculating even through the panic. She had a plan, or something close to it—a tactic, some sliver of strategy in this hellish nightmare to keep them alive just a little longer. “We underestimated how strong his scent is! We need to regroup—get to Clarisse! We’ll stand a better chance together!”

Luke didn’t bother answering. He just ran—sword flashing through the air in a half-useful attempt to clear the way or draw attention to himself. Either outcome worked. He didn’t care which.

The dogs were watching him now. Carefully. Strategically.

But the attacks didn’t stop.

They only got more deliberate—coordinated. Like a pack circling prey that had grown horns. Not safe. Just dangerous enough to make the hunt harder. Worthy of caution. Worthy of teeth.

But what else could Luke do now, except survive and keep his brats alive?

The dog heads still lunged for Percy, but the fish brat had at least recovered enough to move—fast, wild, sloppy but breathing. And Luke kept throwing himself into the path of the jaws, drawing them, baiting them, always putting himself between the monsters and the kids.

And it worked.

They made it to Clarisse, cramming themselves into the circle of shades she commanded, a sea of dead between them and danger. The dog heads circled above, five now—the sixth whining from where Luke had struck it down, still twitching in the crater it left on the deck. The others snarled and frothed, like some cursed mix of sea serpent and rabid dog. Grotesque, unnatural.

But they were together now.

And that had to be enough.

“We keep the soldiers around us,” Luke said, firm and low, eyes darting from the snapping dog heads to Scylla’s figure—still twisted, still smiling. “If a head strikes down, the nearest shades take the hit, wear it out. We don’t swarm. We don’t clump. There are five still moving—we can’t let them catch us by surprise.”

“We stay quick,” Annabeth added, voice tight. “Hit, pull back, move again. Guerrilla tactics.”

“In the open. Exposed. With nothing to fall back on,” Clarisse cut in, voice flat. Her grip on her spear didn’t shake, her eyes didn’t blink. “But we fight. We survive—or we don’t. Either

way, we don't quit."

"No," Luke agreed, blade firm in hand. "We don't."

Percy stood beside them, wide-eyed, pale, but jaw tight with something like resolve. He swallowed, then said, quiet but firm, "Just tell me what to hit."

"You hit what I hit, Prissy," Clarisse snapped—though her tone, for once, wasn't mocking. It was command. Pure and solid. The soldier Cabin Five bred, the head counselor she was growing into.

"And do try to keep up."

Whether Percy was about to argue or agree was lost in the roar of movement above—the heads finally descended.

All at once, the shades closed in, forming a jagged ring around them, a wall of undead and bronze. Muskets raised, bayonets gleaming, some fired, others braced for the onslaught. The air exploded into chaos—growls, snarls, the sharp crack of gunfire, metal groaning beneath them as Scylla's heads crashed down like demons from the pit. The deck splintered, the hull groaned, spidery fractures webbing across the wood with every impact.

They moved how they had to.

Luke struck with precision, fast and sharp, cutting into joints and soft flesh wherever the heads came too close. Annabeth beside him, surgical, methodical—a child of Athena through and through. Clarisse and Percy fought side by side, not in perfect sync, but in rhythm, all force and fury. And through it all, the shades held the line.

And somehow… it worked.

They were surviving. Barely.

Until, of course, everything went to shit.

Scylla screamed—a shriek so high and sharp it made Luke flinch, the sound carving straight through his skull. Clarisse had struck true, her electrified spear plunging into one of the dog heads. It wailed, convulsing violently, flopping like a fish on land, crushing the deck beneath it with its death spasms.

"Pain," Scylla crooned, her voice a fractured echo, layered wrong, overlapping like broken strings on a lyre. "So much pain."

Above them, her humanoid body twitched—too fluid, too loose, limbs sagging like a puppet whose strings had been yanked too hard and snapped. Her head tilted at a grotesque angle as she whimpered again, softer this time, and then—

"Not prey…" her tone darkened, rising in fury. "Enemies. Cruel, *cruel* enemies."

Her void-black eyes locked on Clarisse—no longer serene, no longer eerily delighted. Just pain. Fury. The raw, cornered rage of a predator whose prey had bitten back.

Luke barely had time to tense, to open his mouth—*Run*—when one of the heads shot past him. Fast. Too fast. It slammed into Clarisse like a battering ram, sending her flying. She hit the deck with a crack and skidded, then over the edge. Luke didn't even hear her scream. Only the splash.

No.

*No, no, no.*

*Clarisse—*

"Clarisse!" Percy shouted, already sprinting toward the rail.

Luke instinctively stepped to move—he needed to grab the brat, to stop him before he jumped and got himself killed too—

"Threats," Scylla hissed.

Her voice overlapped, like broken chords, like a scratched record, and the dog heads above twisted and snarled—like fleshy, toothed tentacles orbiting her.

"Hurt me," she said, and her head turned toward him—slow, puppetlike, wrong. *"Hurt. Hurt. Hurt.* Must be eliminated."

And she was looking at him. Only him.

"Puta que pariu*," Luke hissed, muscles coiling tight as all four active heads turned his way. The fifth lay twitching where Clarisse had dropped it—still foaming, still spasming, but out of the game.

"Retreat, Annabeth!" he shouted.

Just in time.

Two heads dove like javelins, and Luke didn't hesitate—he bolted, ducking low as teeth sliced the air behind him. He wasn't thinking about counterattacks now. He was thinking about not dying.

And then it wasn't just two.

It was all four.

They came down like a rain of fangs, a whirlwind of snapping jaws and hot breath. Luke twisted his body in ways it had no business moving—dropping into a desperate split, spine arching as he bent backward beneath one head, sliding between two others, the deck slick under his palms. Every breath was a prayer, every movement pure instinct.

Above him, Scylla shrieked—a high, warbling wail that pierced the air like a banshee's cry.

"It hurts. It hurts," she keened, again and again, her voice cracked and broken, overlapping like a dozen whispers in the same mouth.

The heads swarmed him from every angle—too fast, too many, flailing and wild, all snapping teeth and rage. Scylla was in pain, and it showed. She wasn't attacking, she was lashing out. And Luke—Luke was the chosen target.

He ducked, twisted, slid—spine bending, limbs stretching, one hand scraping the deck as he dodged another set of teeth. His heart pounded like war drums, but he moved. He moved. He —

Didn't see the fourth one.

*Crack.*

A jolt so hard it stole the air from his lungs.

No time to scream. No time to curse.

The world flipped.

The deck vanished beneath his feet, and the sky spun. The wind howled in his ears for one long second—and then it was gone.

*Cold.*

Water.

The sea swallowed him whole.

Everything turned blue.

And Luke sank.

*Our Lady of Sorrows, don't let me die in the sea.*

Chapter End Notes

Puta que pariu — kinda like "for fuck's sake" in this context.

Yeah… shit really hit the fan. Luke tried to use his boundary powers to shield them all, but children are children, and Clarisse is stubborn and too attached to her ghost soldiers, while Percy is too honorable for his own good—he was itching to go out and fight. Didn't even consider he'd be the biggest target thanks to his stinky fish scent.

I tried to make Scylla feel like a creature straight out of a horror movie—dunno how that turned out. I think she acts more like a very successful ambush predator, so when they managed to hurt her back, she got rattled (prey >> threat) and shifted from targeting the vulnerable (Percy—young, inexperienced, and deliciously scented) to going after the threats (the ones who actually harmed her: Clarisse and Luke).

Also, there's some foreshadowing when she says it's been a long time since she smelled a scent like Percy's.

For those who don't know: Our Lady of Sorrows is Mary, the mother of Jesus. This aspect of her is connected to her seven sorrows (she's depicted with her heart pierced by seven swords, each symbolizing one sorrow). She holds deep cultural significance in the Northeast of Brazil, especially Ceará (which is where Luke is from). People pray to her in times of suffering, asking her to help lighten the burden.

Anyway, thanks for reading! I seriously love going through your comments and theories —they give me light and peace of mind, lol. I read and treasure each one, and I promise I'll get around to replying when I have the time.

So… where do you think Luke will end up? And the others? 👀

# Chapter 59: SoM - The Radiant

Chapter Summary

Luke meets the Sun and gets promptly kicked out—with a vengeance.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He came back in waves, consciousness skipping like a stone across water. Luke couldn't tell where the dream ended and reality began—everything was blurred, soft at the edges, like smoke slipping through his fingers. His body floated, weightless, unmoored, like flesh and bone had let go of him. His head throbbed. His thoughts were cracked open and hollow.

*Scylla.*

He remembered her—limbs flailing, teeth everywhere. Panic choking his lungs. The water crushing in. The dog heads playing with him like a chew toy while Scylla shrieked *pain, pain, pain* from somewhere above the surface as he sank—deeper, darker—

Then: the scent of roses.

Sweet and impossible.

Luke frowned, blinking. He could still smell it, like it was caught in his nose. But he'd been underwater. How could he smell roses?

And the peace. He remembered the peace. Everything had gone still—the sea, the chaos, even the monsters. The dog heads had disappeared. Scylla's howling cut off.

Then came the light.

A flash—blinding, soft, full.

And after that, Luke remembered nothing at all.

Wincing, Luke tried to move, his head still feeling unmoored from his body, like his soul was drifting somewhere far from the flesh it was supposed to be anchored to. He cracked his eyes open—barely—and hissed between his teeth as sunlight stabbed at his retinas. It burned, sharp and merciless, forcing him to squeeze them shut again.

His hands moved instinctively to brace himself as he tried to sit up, still blind to the world, the light searing through his eyelids like acid. He didn't doubt the sun would do it, too—flay him raw just for daring to look.

His palms sank into something soft and rough at once. Sand.

He grimaced at the feel of it, grit clinging to his skin, damp and scratchy. He hated that. He always had. Sand mixed with water—it never sat right with him. Even back in the *before*, when he used to walk the beach every weekend.

*Wait.*

Luke's breath caught. He grabbed a handful of sand, squeezed.

Sand.

He had been drowning. In a cave. Their ship trying to force its way through the entrance to the Sea of Monsters.

Clarisse had gone first, storming out like lighting before the thunder. Then Percy. Scylla followed like a nightmare—limbs and teeth and dog heads that barked and snapped and laughed without laughing. Luke remembered cutting one down. Clarisse electrocuted another, her whole body buzzing with it. Then the screech—*pain, pain, pain*—so loud it split his skull, and Scylla hurled Clarisse into the sea like she weighed nothing. Percy screamed. Then he ran.

And—

The cold.

Weightlessness. The kind that didn't feel like flying. The kind that meant sinking. Water dragging at him. His limbs flailing. The dog heads batting him around, cruel and personal. Like a wounded cat with a mouse that had dared to bite back.

But now—

Slowly, carefully, he opened his eyes.

Waves lapped at the shore. Soft. Rhythmic. Blue water pulling at the white-gold sand near his feet and then slipping back, only to return again. And again. And again. The sea catching the sun, scattering it in pieces, the light too gold, too soft, too much like a painting to be real.

Morning bleeding into ocean.

And Luke, lying there, blinking at the sky, wasn't sure if he was supposed to be alive at all.

"How?" he asked himself, blinking again, like opening and shutting his eyes might make the scene change.

Might make any of this make sense.

Predictably, nothing answered. His whisper got caught in the wind and carried off, like it didn't want anyone to hear it but him.

He shook his head. Licked his lips. The skin was dry, a little cracked at the edges—not bad, just sun-bitten. Maybe he hadn't been lying here long. But that didn't explain how he'd gotten here. Or where *here* even was.

Maybe the waves had carried him. Dropped him here by chance. Luck.

But Luke remembered the light. He remembered the smell of roses.

His mouth pulled into a thin line as he slowly scanned his surroundings, the fog in his head beginning to lift, the dullness in his limbs starting to fade.

His mouth pulled into a thin line as he scanned his surroundings, slow and deliberate. The fog in his head was starting to lift. The dull weight in his limbs, fading.

It was an island. Obviously.

He was still in the Sea of Monsters. That much was certain. And he didn't think he was lucky enough to have been dragged out—not really. He wouldn't even *want* that. Not when there was a quest to finish. Grover to save. And—

The kids.

Luke sucked in a breath, his heart hammering in his ears as he looked around, faster now.

Clarisse. Where was Clarisse?

He'd seen her fall. He *remembered*.

But—

Where? Where? *Where*?

It echoed in his skull like a prayer, like a scream muffled by seawater, as his eyes flicked across the sand, the surf, the trees. As if looking hard enough would make her appear—like she could snap into being and tear this choking weight from his chest.

But Luke was alone.

No kids. No Clarisse. Just him.

Just Luke.

*Percy ran after her,* his mind offered, a frantic thread to hold on to. Luke clenched his fingers into the sand, grounding himself even as his thoughts clawed at him. *Percy can breathe underwater. He's been training. He knows how to ride the currents. If he jumped after her, then—*

Then there's a chance. A real one.

Luke closed his eyes, a shaky breath slipping out of his mouth like it didn't belong there. *God, I hope so. Let me be right about this. Please.*

For a moment, he let himself keep his head bowed, praying silently. Just for a second. Just long enough to *feel* the anxiety, to *feel* the fear, to realize he... couldn't do anything. Not when they were all separated.

So he moved, forcing himself to stand on shaky legs like his body was still trying to swim, not walk on land like it was meant to. But he managed.

On his feet, he scanned the surroundings more carefully—cautious, cataloguing the terrain, looking for cover, calculating how he could move unseen. And then he caught it. Something dark in the sand, small—smaller than a person. Something he hadn't seen before—

His bag.

His mind stilled, same as his feet, as he stared—uncomprehending.

*How?*

It had been inside the cabin. He knew that. Luke had only grabbed his sword—lost now, maybe swallowed by the sea or still buried somewhere in the wreck—and ran to save them. (*He failed. Lord, forgive him, he had failed.*) He'd left the bag behind. Left it with Dean and Tyson.

God. He hoped they were safe, too. But he pushed the thought down. He couldn't afford it, not now. It would weigh him down, slow him, and he was on unknown land, surrounded by unknown threats. He had to survive—he *had* to—if he wanted to get back to his kids—

He breathed in—shaky, steadying.

Then he moved. Stepped forward, grabbed the bag, opened it.

It was intact.

Everything was still inside—minus the books Annabeth had stolen, of course—but the rest… untouched. Even his sword.

Luke blinked, furrowing his brows.

*How?*

None of this made sense. His bag was here. He was on a beach, alive, when he should've drowned.

And the roses—

*The roses.*

The scent slammed back into his memory, thick and sweet. His eyes went wide. He knew what that meant. He'd known it in the *before*. He knew it now.

*Nossa Senhora, mãe de Jesus.**

He bowed his head and crossed himself, kissing his hand—reverent. Quiet.

"I'll make a promise, my mother," he whispered. "If I get out of this alive… I'll add a cross to my bracelet. A real one. No more shame in my faith. Not even in the middle of a pagan Camp." He paused. Then added, quieter, like it wasn't meant for anyone but her: "You got me out of this—I know it was you."

He pressed his hands to his lips, like sealing a vow.

Not just a prayer. A *promessa*.*

A promise made. A promise owed.

He strapped the bag onto his shoulders, feeling a little lighter now—even with everything that had gone to hell.

*Our Lady was with him.*

She'd helped him. That alone meant hope was still in sight.

He picked a direction—any direction—and walked. Eyes sharp. Every nerve tuned to catch the slightest hint that something was off. Hyperaware. Ready.

This place he'd landed in was strange, but that didn't surprise him—everything in this cursed sea was weird.

*Unnatural.*

The Mist hung thick in the air, easier to see now that he wasn't fighting for his life or trying to wrangle a bunch of stubborn brats. It shimmered faintly at the edges of things, like the world couldn't decide what it wanted to look like.

Or maybe it *did* know.

And Luke was just seeing the in-between—what his brain thought was real, and what lay hidden beneath the veil.

He shook his head.

*Focus*, he told himself, jaw tight, face set in a hard frown as he moved forward, careful. Steps quiet. As quiet as he could make them.

There were trees scattered around him in loose clumps, casting patches of shade across the wide, golden-green plains. Their trunks were pale—sun-bleached, almost silvery—and their

leaves, like the grass, shimmered in that same golden-green hue. Beautiful. Unnatural. The kind of beautiful that made you suspicious.

They fluttered in the breeze like they were made of light, not plant. No fruit. Just smooth limbs stretching lazily toward the sky, basking in the sun like they were greeting it.

Luke frowned. That kind of detail stuck with him. Too specific to be chance. It smelled like a sign—something to tuck away and turn over later until it clicked into place.

And the feeling...

That prickle at the back of his neck. The way his hair stood on end like something was watching.

He'd learned to trust that feeling. Especially after Hermes.

Like an instinct burned deep into him—something that knew before he did.

It made his heart skip, breath catch for a second too long. He hated that. The way it still got to him. But he didn't show it. Just tightened his grip on the strap of the bag, kept walking, kept his face blank. Kept his senses open like a wound.

*What else was he supposed to do?*

He was on some strange island, no ship, no way out. And if something *was* watching him, he had to pretend he hadn't noticed. Had to act like everything was normal. Like he didn't feel like he was being pulled in two—between now and *then*, between what was real and what was about to be.

If they were watching him, fine. He could watch back. Or at least buy time. Even if his mind felt too slow, too heavy, like it was trying to think through water. Weighted down by—

*...Everything.*

His breath shook, but Luke kept going, eyes locked straight ahead even as his awareness stayed sharp, tuned to every detail.

Hyperaware of the shadows.

Of what looked like flickers between the trees scattered around him.

Of the grass—too tall, some blades high enough to cover him entirely, and he wasn't short by mortal standards. It shifted as if something had just passed through, fast and unseen.

*Strange*, the word echoed in his mind again. *Everything about this is strange.*

And the longer he walked, the trees began to thin out—slowly, gradually—replaced by an endless sea of light. The grass shimmered like it had stolen sunlight itself, weaving it into every blade. It was beautiful, the kind of beauty that made him forget himself for just a moment. Made him stop. Made him *look*.

But it didn’t last.

The further he went, the heavier the watching became. Less like curiosity. More like pressure. Like judgment. The kind that didn’t need to be seen to be *felt*. Luke knew he was being tracked—tagged, even if they didn’t show themselves.

But he could *sense* them.

Or *presences*, his mind corrected.

He kept his muscles loose on instinct when the grass shifted to his left. At the same time, a flicker of shadow passed at the edge of his vision. His chest tightened, but he didn't flinch.

He started cataloguing without thinking.

*Two.*

He was one—still disoriented, but not injured. Not significantly, at least.

He tested it quietly, rolling his neck, stretching his shoulders. They were tight. His chest still ached faintly from almost drowning. He tried to keep the movement natural, casual. Not like he was preparing for a fight.

His sword was still with him. That counted for something.

He could—

His mind stopped.

Luke blinked, then stilled, tension crashing back into his body like a tidal wave that didn’t care it wasn’t wanted. He blinked again, slower this time, as if that would erase what he was seeing.

But no.

A herd.

*Fuck*, he thought, flatly. Too overwhelmed to feel anything but apathetic.

This is… this is Thrinacia. The island of the sun titan, Helios.

*How?*

It was supposed to be hidden. Lost to time after the titan retired, or whatever the god equivalent of retirement was. Luke didn’t pretend to understand the divine bureaucracy of domains, mantles, or fading. As far as he could tell, all of it was twisted together—faith, power, memory—knotted tight until it became as essential to a god as oxygen was to a mortal.

But this was it.

His mind looped endlessly, dragging in every sign he'd half-seen, half-catalogued. The sun-bleached trees. The golden-green leaves. The grass that shimmered like metal spun fine. The endless plains glowing like a sea made of sunlight.

There was no doubt about it. Luke was *fucked*.

"Intruder," came a voice—melodic, but not kind.

Luke didn't startle, even as his body locked up. He'd been aware of them from the beginning. But still—his body wanted to react. To jump. To run. To get off this island, to find his kids. Maybe even to go back home. Somewhere safe.

Somewhere he knew didn't exist.

Not for him.

"Another one. Long years have passed since heretics walked these shores," said a second voice, carrying the same lilting quality. Luke had heard it before, that tone—something he associated with nymphs. Some more than others. The ones born of gods always sounded like that: almost divine, but not quite. Immortal, but not fully holy.

"Trespassing on sacred land," the voice continued, "long hidden by shifting waters from the unworthy eyes of mortals and gods alike."

Luke turned to look—and there they were.

Two women.

Both barefoot, he noted instantly, measuring their stance. All lean, elegant lines. Graceful. Fast. His mind named it immediately, looping to *that* day—falling, the apple passed from hand to hand, the shrieks—

*No. Focus.*

Their skin had that faint luminous sheen, like Lee sometimes had when he laughed too hard. But brighter. More.

They wore something like chitons, simple and knee-length, sun-bleached like everything else on this cursed island—pale green and gold. One held a silver crock, the other a copper staff. No armor. But Luke knew better than to relax over that. Not with myths walking around in flesh and bone.

He shifted slightly, enough to track their movement as they walked in front of him, soundless. Their hair glinted in the light, gold—too gold, like midday sun that didn't warm. And their eyes were copper. Hard. Stern. Judging, maybe.

Luke didn't like this.

"…Forgive me. May I know your names?" he asked, light, polite. Formal. "I didn't mean to intrude, but I don't have the means to leave without assistance."

He already knew who they were. Some part of him did, even if his mind didn't grab the names fast enough. They hadn't seemed important in the books. Barely a footnote in the lessons.

"We are Lampetia and Phaethusa, mortal," the taller one said, tone clipped and cold. A voice like a blade held out flat—not yet swung. She narrowed her eyes at him. "We are the guardians of this blessed island. Daughters of the Sun, and protectors of our radiant father's sacred herd." She tilted her chin, just slightly. "You walk now upon a land that did not summon you."

*Summon?*

The word echoed in his mind like a puzzle piece trying to fit a board he didn't have all the pieces for.

But the implications were clear enough.

"I didn't come here by choice," Luke said evenly, eyes still tracking both of them—always moving, always circling. Herding him.

"And yet here you stand," said the shorter one—*Lampetia*, Luke filed the name away. Her copper eyes narrowed, glinting like banked fire. "Long-gone trespassers spoke much the same. And still—pain followed."

"We will not make the same mistake twice," Phaethusa continued next, her voice harder. She slammed her copper staff into the grass.

The sound echoed, final.

She locked eyes with him, judgment simmering behind her gaze, a furnace glinting in the light. "You have stepped where you were not summoned. The Sun sees all—and now, he shall see *you*."

*What the fuck,* Luke thought, blinking rapidly as he tried to make sense of it all—but Lampetia moved fast, sharp. She slashed her silver crook through the air, caught him by the collar, and yanked.

Brought him with them. Took the choice right out of his hands.

Not that he really had any to begin with.

*Helios. I'll be judged by Helios.* The name kept thundering in his head like a hammer pounding at a stubborn, tilted nail.

A Titan.

A Titan—while Kronos is still out there, gathering his forces. And the Titans would be the first to offer him help. *That*, Luke remembered.

Would Helios join him? Was he already aligned? Was Luke going to die for saying no to Kronos—or just for stepping onto this island no one was supposed to reach?

The nymphs had implied as much. You didn't *walk* into Thrinacia. Not unless something opened the way.

No good options. None of them were.

*And he couldn't run.*

He sent a discreet glance around. Cattle stood all around, scattered at a distance—some closer. Sheep wandered among them, perfect white wool gleaming like polished silver. Luke didn't need to be Mercury to know fleece like that would cost a fortune. Owning a creature like that? More than most rich men could ever afford.

Lampetia yanked him again, sharp enough to nearly throw him off balance. When he looked up, her face was flat, unfriendly.

"Do not think to play any wily tricks, mortal," she hissed, jerking him forward again. "We are aware of the thoughts that thread through lesser minds."

Her grip tightened. "My flock is under *my* protection. They are not for you to *stare at*."

*Odysseus really affected them, didn't he? Or, well, his crew,* Luke figured, side-eyeing the two of them as he winced, trying to keep his footing steady under her unrelenting grip.

He wasn't going to fight. No—*not* the Sun Titan's daughters, not when the Titan himself was still around, and if he thought these two were difficult with the whole cow business, he was sure the Titan would be worse.

Luke had no desire to be smote.

Never mind that he still had to figure out how to get off this island and find the kids before—

*Focus.*

His thoughts scrambled, chasing themselves in circles as they neared a structure ahead—something massive and gleaming under the weight of the sun, the kind of palace that blinded if you looked at it too long. But it wasn't gaudy. Not like Cabin Seven back at Camp. This was more... controlled. Elegant. The kind of beauty that didn't need to announce itself to be known.

Luke didn't know if it was a palace or a temple or whatever divine beings called their homes—but he was sure it belonged to Helios.

And after that, there was no time left to think.

He was taken—dragged, really—through the building's halls.

There wasn't time to see much, only flashes: white marble, golden accents, the blur of light on stone. Then he was shoved into a room—sunlit, bright, wide open. No windows. Just air and light, drifting through wide, arched openings carved into the walls, elegant Greek curves that let the wind brush his face in gentle, sweeping passes.

It was hot.

He noticed it immediately—hotter than outside, the kind of heat that settled into your skin and *stayed*. He could already feel sweat starting to form at his neck, under his arms.

Discreetly, he glanced sideways.

The two nymphs didn't seem to notice the temperature at all. Unbothered. Like heat wasn't something that applied to them. They didn't even spare him a glance as they continued forward, dragging him along a straight path—

And then Luke saw him.

A figure, seated on a sofa set right in the middle of the room. The cushions angled just so, giving him the perfect view of the land beyond: a golden field that gleamed in the sun until it blurred into the sea.

A man, Luke realized.

Broad shoulders. Golden hair. Relaxed posture. He was sipping a cocktail, picking up fruit from the table beside him with slow, idle movements—like someone with all the time in the world to sit there and do nothing at all.

*Helios.*

"Father," Phaethusa said, finally letting go of Luke's arms and stepping forward, crossing the last few paces to stand before the table.

Helios hummed, still sipping his wine, eyes fixed somewhere far beyond the horizon. He didn't look at her.

"An intruder has come to the island," she continued. "Uninvited."

"Intruder often *does* mean uninvited, daughter," he said at last, his voice like a supernova dropped into the room—heat and gravity, all at once.

Then he shifted, turning slowly, and Luke saw him. *Really* saw him.

Or tried to.

His skin glowed like his daughters'—but more. Not soft. Not gentle. Just the raw, unfiltered radiance of the sun. The light didn't just hit him. It *bent* around him, curved to make him shine brighter.

His eyes were copper, like theirs, but burning. Alive. Glowing like fire even in full daylight. And they didn't blink. Not once.

"It's been a long time since a demigod bothered me," Helios said, at last, crossing one leg over the other as he leaned back. "Not since I pulled my island out of reach and let that brat take over my job."

He sipped again. One arm draped behind the sofa. He looked entirely relaxed.

And yet—

Luke took in the rest. The loose, open white linen shirt. The solar medallion at his chest—something that felt older than Olympus just by existing. The tailored bermudas. The sunglasses perched over slicked-back, sunlit hair.

He looked like he'd stepped off the sand at some impossibly rich beach.

And yet Uncle D's voice echoed in his head now, clear as a bell:

*Retired Sun Titan.*

Keyword being Titan. And Luke still didn't know whether this guy was allied with Kronos or not.

"Lord Helios, my landing here was entirely accidental, I can assure you of that," Luke started fast—cutting in before the nymphs could open their mouths and spin some story where he was a second coming of Odysseus.

He didn't trust these two trustless women not to do exactly that.

"I was with my crew. We were fighting a monster. I fell into the sea. Miraculously, I survived and woke up here. I have no memory of what happened between falling and washing up on this island."

Helios just stared at him.

And when Lampetia opened her mouth—no doubt to say something that would bury his chances even deeper than they already were—Helios lifted a hand. Then leaned forward, his gaze narrowing on Luke like a spotlight locking in on a target.

Luke's muscles went rigid, like standing perfectly straight might make the Titan *pity* him.

*Is he recognizing me?* Luke thought, thoughts spiraling. *From some description Kronos gave him, if he's working with Kronos? Or is he going to smite me for daring to enter his island uninvited?*

The questions tangled in his mind, one chasing the other faster and faster—but he stayed still.

Still as stone. Face calm. Blank.

Letting nothing show.

Then—

"You reek of another pantheon's stink, demigod. But you're Greek," Helios finally said, leaning back—and Luke felt it. Like the sun had pulled away. Like a cloud had slipped across its burning light.

Luke tensed instantly, legs locking like he might bolt—eyes flicking to every possible exit.

The open arches? Death sentence. If he jumped, he'd end up a smear on the rocks below or fish food. And if he ran? He doubted he'd make it more than a few steps before being vaporized by a flick of the Titan's fingers—like a sun flare, sudden and absolutely devastating.

Helios simply rested his head against the back of his couch, eyes still locked on Luke, watching him like he was weighing something—then huffed.

"Whatever. I don't care. Too much politicking. Too many headaches. I'm retired. That kind of mess gets dealt with by the brat now, not me."

But his eyes stayed on Luke. Sharpened.

"Though I suppose," he added, slower now, "this problem was dropped at my doorstep by another divine hand. If, as you say—if it's even true—you don't remember how you got here."

"I can assure you I had no intention of coming here, Lord Helios," Luke said carefully, his tone even, eyes flicking between the Titan and the two nymphs still watching him—too still, too suspicious.

"They always say that," Helios snorted, finally deigning to rise from his seat—and *Jesus*, he was enormous. Like watching the sun rise over the horizon, slow and inevitable.

"And look what it did. My sacred cows, slain and eaten."

Odysseus. Again.

"And that was a travesty, Lord Helios," Luke said, still careful, keeping his voice steady even as instinct screamed at him to step back.

He didn't.

He locked his muscles, held his ground, and didn't dare glance at the nymphs.

The Titan was moving now—approaching. A supernova in motion, glowing brighter the closer he came. He looked down at Luke like he was *thinking*. Or weighing something.

"But I haven't laid a finger on your cattle. And your daughters"—he nodded, slow, calculated—"have done their duty well. They caught me. And brought me straight to you."

Helios was right in front of him now, and Luke barely reached his chest. His own felt tight, lungs resisting breath, heart pounding in his ears like war drums—loud and useless. Instinct screamed at him to run. To hide.

But you couldn't hide from the eye of the sun.

Not here.

Then Helios narrowed his eyes and leaned in, face too close, the air warping with the heat. His eyes glowed brighter—blindingly bright, searing Luke's vision. He blinked, but it didn't help. His skin prickled, stung, burned. He was sure it would be red, sun-scorched, like he'd stood too long under an unforgiving sky.

Helios stared at him—*through* him—scanning.

Then he snorted, finally leaning back. But his radiance didn't fade. If anything, it grew sharper.

"Ah," he said, voice like gold catching flame. "That's why your little verbal tricks sound familiar."

A pause. Then—

"A spawn of Hermes."

He stared down at Luke, and the next words came like a sentence:

*"A cunning thief."*

"Just like Odysseus," Phaethusa added from beside him.

Luke didn't spare her a glance. His attention was locked on the Titan—cold sweat gathering at the back of his neck—as Helios's skin flared, bright enough to burn. Just for a moment.

It hurt to look. His vision went white.

Then it was gone.

Helios's face was set in a scowl now, his gaze pinned on Luke like he was an ant—something he could crush, but hadn't found a reason to.

Not yet.

"Tell me, little thief," Helios said, voice light—conversational, almost careless. "Have you laid your sticky fingers on what didn't belong to you?"

It sounded soft. Silk-thin.

But Luke could hear the threat under it just fine.

“We found him wandering, Father,” Lampetia cut in, her tone clipped as she cast him a narrow-eyed glance. “Moving through lands that haven’t felt mortal feet in eons. Brought to us—as declared by the wisdom granted to us by the radiant sun—” she bowed her head slightly to her father, who gave a faint gesture for her to rise, “—by foreign gods, with intentions unknown.”

Helios hummed, his light dimming, contained. He moved back to his sofa, settled in, and poured himself another cocktail.

“I’ve seen smaller offenses end in ash,” Helios murmured, swirling his drink without looking at Luke. He took a slow sip, eyes drifting toward the horizon like he was lost in thought.

Then—

“But I tire of this nonsense. And my cows are intact—aren’t they, Phaethusa?”

Phaethusa straightened, then slammed her copper staff against the palace floor. The sound echoed, sharp and deliberate—and Luke felt it: a pulse, soft but real, skating across his skin. Not like the oppressive weight he was used to. Lighter. Quieter. Discreet.

“Yes, Father,” she said after a beat. “All seven herds have their fifty cows, grazing where they should be.”

“And the sheep are much the same,” Lampetia added a moment later.

Helios tapped his fingers against the armrest of his sofa. The sound was soft, barely there—but to Luke, it echoed like a pounding in his skull. Final. Measured. Like the Titan was weighing the worth of his life and deciding what fate to place on it.

“So the only offense was the invasion…” Helios muttered to himself, glancing sideways, his face still angled toward the sunlit sea outside.

Luke stayed quiet. Jaw clenched. Heart pounding loud in his chest.

But none of it showed.

“But that doesn’t warrant a smiting,” Helios huffed, throwing his head back against the sofa like the entire exchange had been a minor inconvenience. “As it stands, I’d rather avoid causing a stir. Let Olympus forget their retired Titan—and Kronos forget I still exist.”

*What.*

Luke blinked. His hands twitched before he laced them behind his back in one smooth motion, hiding the reaction before it showed.

Still, he recovered quickly—mind already tucking the words away, filing them into the shape of a plan.

*So he’s not on either side,* Luke thought, brow tightening. *And he doesn’t want to make noise. I can work with that.*

“Lord Helios,” he began, voice soft. Silk and air. The right shade of deferential. He tilted his head just so—submissive, nonthreatening. Not that he wasn’t. The Titan could vaporize him with a stray thought.

“I only wish to leave,” Luke said. “To not take any more of your precious time. I’m on a quest—”

*“A quest?”*

The Titan scowled, rising to his feet and crossing the space between them in a blink—like a star falling to earth, burning bright for a single second.

The light seared across Luke’s vision, blinding. He wondered if he’d gone half-blind—before it vanished again, leaving only a pulse of radiance flickering beneath too-perfect skin. Like it was *itching* to escape. To burn again.

“The gods have their eyes on you? As they do with heroes?”

Helios passed a hand over the lower half of his face, eyes still locked on Luke, narrowing. He looked… *affected*, Luke thought. Not angry. Just shaken. Like something had clicked into place, and he greatly disliked what it meant.

Then, without breaking eye contact, Helios spoke past him.

“Lampetia. Phaethousa. Do we still have that rotten pile of wood that washed ashore—how long ago? Doesn’t matter. Is it still there?”

The sisters exchanged a glance—brief, unreadable—before Lampetia answered smoothly.

“Yes, Father. It remains where it landed. Rotting at the shore.”

“Good,” Helios exhaled, his light finally dimming.

Then he gestured toward Luke, like brushing away an insect—something he’d tolerated too long, couldn’t kill, and no longer wanted in his sight.

“Take him there. Give him the ship. I’ll send the winds to carry him away from here.”

Luke blinked.

But the nymphs were already moving, hands at his arms, pulling him along before he could even open his mouth to ask—*politely, of course, and with no small amount of reverence*—what the hell that actually meant.

He didn’t get the chance.

And the whole time, as they guided him out of the hall, the sunlight too bright and the air still thick with leftover suspicion, something twisted low in his gut.

*Well*, he thought, *I've got a ship. I'm leaving. Didn't get smited by a recluse Titan. So that's something.*

But beneath it, a quieter thread wound tighter: *Where exactly is he sending me?*

Chapter End Notes

* promessa – promise (but the cultural weight is significant. It's very common for people to repay what they've received by going on a pilgrimage or doing something sacrificial—hence Luke saying that.)
* Nossa Senhora, mãe de Jesus – Our Lady, mother of Jesus.

The smell of roses is commonly associated with Marian apparitions and miracles—her presence. Calm, soft flashes of light too, but the roses are more common (my aunt smelled it once!). The image of Our Lady of Sorrows crying also carries deep symbolism.

In any case—Luke met the great radiant Sun. The Titan: Helios. And I have to admit, Helios has taken up residence in my brain. He's tempting me to make him the second pairing, very hard, no matter what Mercury wishes, lol. I might write a oneshot...

Here’s a drawing of Helios so you guys can understand what I mean…

/>

My take on him was: retired Sun Titan. And since he’s a Titan, he doesn’t even pretend to be anything but otherworldly—certainly not mortal. Hence all the sun comparisons, the blinding light. His daughters, the nymphs, are his guardians. And as you can probably tell, they’re still very pissy about Odysseus and haven’t let it go, lol. But Helios doesn’t care about attracting attention. He just wants his tranquil retirement and his sacred cows. So he let Luke go.

Anyway! Thank you for reading! I read and appreciate every comment, and I love the little theories you all spin.

So, where’s Luke headed now? (Luke is getting vibe-checked across the Sea of Monsters from one end to the other, lol.)

# Chapter 60: SoM - Aeaea

Chapter Summary

Luke ends up on a new island after Helios launches him away—then a dove appears, and suddenly Luke takes a backseat as Lúcia steals the show. Also, there's a wolf…?

**I'll have a break next week—there will be no updates.**

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The winds and the little ship Helios had given him made the journey faster—which, for that, Luke was thankful. He needed to find the kids urgently. *(He didn't entertain the possibility that any of them were dead. He didn't.)*

But it also made the trip incredibly unnerving.

Watching the world blur past him at supersonic speed was… an experience, to say the least.

He had tried to steer the thing, but it was like attempting to control an enraged bull mid-rampage—completely out of control, charging forward with single-minded fury.

Honestly, Luke was pretty sure the Titan had been so eager to get rid of him that he had flicked him across the sea like one might flick a fly off their sleeve. And considering Helios was a Titan—an old one at that—that flick had sent him flying with far more force than was reasonable.

So, after a few futile attempts at wrangling the ship, Luke had simply accepted his reality.

He let the insane little vessel continue its crazed course, reasoning that at least it was moving so fast that no monsters could possibly keep up.

And praying—*very* hard—that when the winds finally stopped, he'd be on land and not stranded in the middle of the ocean, surrounded by a very hungry welcoming party of sea monsters.

Because, let's be honest—this ship?

It was basically a raft.

A barely-holding-together, sad excuse for a raft.

But, by the grace of the Lord, it looked like he was getting his wish.

Luke squinted, clinging to the rotting mast of this wreck of a ship, the only thing standing between him and the open maw of the sea.

Out in the distance, a green speck stood out against the endless blue, but it was hard to tell if it was real. His vision blurred, the world tilting no matter how hard he tried to focus. Everything around him bled together, a shifting, dizzying mess that made his stomach lurch.

But he kept his eyes open.

He *had* to pay attention.

The closer he got, the more certain he was—it was land.

Relief came first, swift and sharp, tangled up with joy and the ever-familiar thread of caution. Luke was always cautious; safety was a slippery guest, slipping through his fingers like sand whenever he needed it most.

And yet, the ship was bolting straight toward it.

It was as if Helios had taken careful aim before kicking him across the sea like a seasoned goal-scorer—the kind who always found the net, no matter how far they struck from.

The thought stirred a wary sensation deep in Luke's chest as he clung to the mast, staring ahead. The island was growing clearer by the second, a rich, heady green spreading across the horizon. Forest. Thick and alive, bursting with all kinds of trees and blooming flowers.

But he was moving too fast to see details. Colors blurred, bleeding into one another, leaving his eyes to strain against the wind and speed. Still, he caught flashes—green, pink, blue—vague shapes that had to be trees, flowers, and bushes.

Everything looked flushed and healthy, alive in a way that felt almost unnatural.

Like some kind of paradise.

It wasn't. There wouldn't be a paradise in this nightmare sea of supernatural strangeness. Not here. Not in this place.

Luke knew that all too well—just as he knew he didn't have a choice.

But it was land. And Luke would take it.

He clung tightly to the mast, arms wrapped around it with all the strength he could muster. He wasn't sure if the ship would leap from water to land in one violent jolt, but just in case, he'd hold on. Better to be cautious than to go flying the moment this thing started skidding across the sand like some runaway rock skipping over water.

But none of that happened.

Instead, the winds stopped—sudden and complete. The ship began to slow, its breakneck speed easing into something almost manageable. Not exactly smooth, but enough that Luke didn't feel like he was going to vomit up everything he'd ever eaten. Well—*less* like it. He really wasn't made for sea travel.

Still clinging to the mast, Luke blinked in surprise as the ship dragged through the sand, its lower hull scraping along the shore with increasing resistance—until, finally, it stopped.

He stayed where he was for a moment longer, just… staring. Half-expecting the ship to jolt back to life, maybe start bouncing around or launching itself into the air—who knew what that grumpy Titan had enchanted this thing with?

But nothing happened.

And he'd been still for too long.

Slowly, Luke peeled himself away from the mast, taking a few cautious steps forward, his eyes scanning the coastline.

It was… beautiful.

The air smelled like a perfume shop—sweet, sharp, earthy, floral. Dozens of scents, maybe hundreds, all blending together into something strangely soothing. It made him relax in spite of himself.

And that was enough to put him on edge.

*Unnatural,* something in him whispered.

*A trap.*

He continued his slow sweep of the area, all his senses sharpened, alert to anything that felt off.

Fruit trees—dozens of them—lined the edge of the forest. Figs, apples, pomegranates. All overripe, their skins splitting in places, practically begging him to come closer, to pluck them from their branches, to sink his teeth in and taste the sweetness.

His stomach stirred.

He ignored it.

He didn't trust them. The fruit was too perfect, too tempting. Sweet lies, meant to lure in the unaware prey—and Luke had long since stopped being prey.

Flowers were scattered among the trees, too. Herbs as well, if his memory served him right. Red to black, sun-thriving to shade-dwelling. His gaze lingered on a cluster of deep violet blossoms growing near the edge of the trees.

*Wolf's bane,* the name surfaced unbidden, rising from one of Chiron's old lessons. The centaur's voice seemed to whisper across his thoughts, faint but clear:

*"A poisonous plant, said to grow where spirits pass…"*

Not exactly a comforting omen.

But Luke was long past omens.

Coincidences often felt like fate to the desperate—and he refused to fall into that trap.

Breathing in deeply, Luke rolled his shoulders and set both hands on the straps of his bag—thankful beyond words that he still had it, even after everything.

Then he climbed out of the ship.

His hands and feet moved in practiced tandem—quick, steady, clever—until he dropped down, feet sinking into the sand. A few grains slipped into his sandals, and he reflexively shook one foot out, trying to ignore the gritty discomfort as he gathered the nerve to explore this unknown place. Alone.

Yeah. Going off alone into one of the magical Greek islands tucked inside this twisted corner of the world—one that clearly didn't follow any rules that made sense—didn't exactly scream *smart*.

But staying still like a sitting duck didn't, either.

Luke steeled himself. He had to find the kids. Regroup. Get the Fleece. Save Grover.

Save Camp.

Together.

He clung to that—hard—and it was enough to make his feet move.

Luke took a few cautious steps forward, half-expecting the trees to come alive, their branches stretching toward him like tendrils in some horror film. But—

Nothing.

He kept moving, staying close to the forest's edge, his gaze flicking toward it constantly. Everything looked strangely well-kept—like a garden designed to look wild. Not messy, not overgrown, just… intentionally untamed. Still, it was beautiful. Unsettlingly so.

Like a paradise hidden in the middle of the sea, leaning close to whisper promises of heaven in his ear.

It felt like an illusion.

But more than that, it was too quiet.

No rustling in the brush. No birdsong. No distant scurry of animals. He hadn't gone far yet, but still—*nothing.* And that was wrong.

Until he heard it.

Soft. Barely there. But he caught it.

*Coos.*

Luke tensed, whipping his head toward the sound.

Out on the horizon, where the sea met the sky and the waves crashed and curled back into themselves, he saw movement—small, gliding just above the water.

A bird.

No—a dove.

He blinked, startled, watching as it flew straight toward him…

And landed on his head.

Luke froze for a moment, then carefully lifted one hand, moving slowly, gently nudging it under the bird. He brought it down to eye level, the dove perched neatly on his palm, staring at him as he stared back. It fluffed itself up, gave a lazy preen, and tilted its head with quiet curiosity.

It wasn't afraid of him. Not even a little.

That was… strange.

Birds were supposed to be skittish. Flighty. This one was calm—*too* calm.

Luke frowned, eyes narrowing slightly as he studied the dove's pristine white feathers. His gaze flicked toward the sea, watching as the foam gathered on the shore and curled back into the waves.

*Doves*, he thought, the realization settling in his ribs, something that felt too much like hope threading quietly alongside it.

They were sacred animals of Aphrodite.

*Did she…?* Luke wondered, lightly brushing a finger over the dove's head.

The bird closed its eyes and leaned into the touch, and a small smile tugged at his lips despite himself.

*Did she answer our prayers?*

He didn't know. But he wasn't about to take any chances. So he bowed his head slightly and murmured under his breath,

“Lady Aphrodite, I thank and honor you for the guidance you’ve seen fit to provide.”

The dove stared at him, tilting its head to the side. Then, with a sudden flutter, it spread its wings and took off—circling his head a few times before flying a short distance ahead.

When Luke didn’t move, it doubled back, flapping once more and hovering insistently in front of him.

Persistent. Clearly expecting him to follow.

Luke hesitated, biting his lip. He didn’t know where he was, and sure, maybe Aphrodite had answered. After all, the dove was her animal. And this one was *too* smart. Too persistent. Too set on staying with him.

That felt intentional.

And he hoped, *really hoped*, it was here to help. The last thing he needed was to be part of some divine comedy, chaos tossed into his life just to entertain the gods.

But this seemed like the only exit out of the hole he’d been dropped into.

So, he followed.

He followed as it led him deeper into the forest, past towering trees—so tall he found himself wondering just how old they were. He followed as the dense woods thinned into a meadow, overflowing with flowers whose scent hit stronger here than it had by the shore—rich and sweet, clinging to the air.

And he followed as shapes began to form in the distance—buildings, white marble glinting in the light.

Fountains came into view first, beautiful and elaborate, sending streams of water into the air shaped like eagles mid-flight, or lions mid-hunt. The buildings were squat and rectangular, each one carved from smooth marble, luxurious and polished. They climbed up the mountainside, stacked in terraces, and on every level, he spotted glimmering pools of water, connected by waterslides that looked like they belonged in some surreal painting.

And the dove? The dove was still guiding him.

It flew ahead, circling one of the houses before landing on a low wall that marked its perimeter, fluffing its feathers like it belonged there.

*Greek,* Luke’s mind supplied automatically. It was very much that—columns surrounding a central courtyard, shaded porticoes lining the perimeter. Classic, unmistakable.

But that wasn’t what caught his attention.

No—what did was the clothing hanging on ropes strung across the courtyard, tied between two columns.

As soon as his eyes locked on it, the dove cooed, flapped over, and perched beside the clothing.

Then it pecked at the fabric.

And looked right at him.

Luke stared, warily eyeing the house, half-expecting someone to step out at any moment.

*The message is pretty clear,* he thought, lips pulling into a thin line. *It wants me to steal it.*

Luke hesitated a second too long, eyes scanning the house, the courtyard, the layout. Greek, his mind repeated—too many houses, too well-built. Not a lone villa in the middle of nowhere. A cluster. A city.

Which meant that if someone caught him here—if anyone realized he didn't belong—

He was *screwed.*

Where was this?

*Aeaea,* his mind supplied, unhelpfully helpful. *The island of the witch Circe.*

Goddamnit.

The damn bird cooed again—louder this time, more insistent—and Luke let out a heavy sigh.

He had no way out of this, not really. The dove seemed dead set on helping him, and what other options did he have?

He was a male demigod stranded on a man-hating island—*the* man-hating island—the one where they turned guys into pigs. Literally. And he had no idea how to leave.

He didn't trust that ship to take him anywhere again. Without Helios' winds, he doubted it would've moved at all—just drifted, useless, until something dragged it under. So, yeah, he was grateful. Even if the speed had been a little… *excessive.*

And the kids…

He swallowed hard.

If things followed canon, Percy and Annabeth would end up here eventually. He didn't know if it would actually happen, or if the timelines had diverged too far already, but if it did…

Another coo broke through the thought.

Luke shook his head. *Focus.*

He swung one leg over the wall, keeping a wary eye on the house. Still nothing. Too quiet. He wasn't sure if it was Aphrodite's influence or just dumb luck—either way, he didn't want to think too much about it.

The coast seemed clear.

And for now, that was all he needed to know.

His feet touched the courtyard and he crouched low, ears tuned for any strange sounds. But the bird had clearly run out of patience. It flitted down and landed on his head, tugging sharply at his hair.

"Okay, I'll stop dragging it out," he whispered, a touch of exasperation slipping into his voice as he stood and moved.

And wasn't that strange—obeying a bird.

But then again, this wasn't just any bird. It was too smart, too intentional. A symbol of Aphrodite herself. Or maybe even something more…

He shut that thought down before it could form.

So no, maybe it wasn't so strange after all.

Better to obey than risk offending a god.

Luke stepped forward and pulled the fabric from the rope, folding it awkwardly in his arms as he glanced back at the bird.

The dove fluffed its feathers, staring back at him for a long moment—then, apparently satisfied, it flew off again, landing neatly on the doorknob. It gave a sharp little hop, cooed, and fluffed itself up like it was waiting.

*Now it wants me to break into a house?* Luke thought, pulse skipping. *Seriously?*

*I thought this whole entering-and-breaking thing was more of a Hermes specialty than an Aphrodite one,* he mused bitterly, creeping forward with careful, measured steps.

His eyes darted around, scanning the silent courtyard like someone might suddenly appear—catch him in the act, raise the alarm, and next thing he knew, he'd be a squealing pig on a platter, never to see his friends or family again—

And yep, there it was. His mind was spiraling.

*Focus,* he reminded himself again, hand reaching for the doorknob just as the dove fluttered to his shoulder.

He opened the door and stepped inside, eyes wide, unblinking, scanning the space for any sign of the house's owner. He expected movement, sound—*something.*

But—

It was empty.

Not just unoccupied—*untouched.*

As if it had barely been lived in.

Scratch that. As if it had been *years* since anyone had taken shelter beneath its roof.

Luke furrowed his brows, glancing back over his shoulder toward the rope where the clothes had been hanging moments before—now draped over his arm. They'd looked freshly placed, like someone had just stepped away.

But the inside of the house told a different story.

Dust clung to every surface. No warmth. No signs of life. No personal touches. No decorations. Just blank walls and empty air.

Then he glanced at the dove on his shoulder.

It was staring at him—steadily, silently—with a look far too knowing for a bird.

Luke kept his mouth shut.

Some things were better left unquestioned—for the sake of his sanity, if nothing else.

So he just walked.

The dove cooed sharply whenever he veered the wrong way, correcting his path like an impatient guide, until he reached what looked like a bedroom.

Without pause, the bird flew to a small stand in the corner, landing beside a box and pecking at it insistently. Then it looked at him. Pecked again.

This time, Luke didn't hesitate.

He walked over, took the box into his hands, and opened it—only to pause.

Jewelry.

Gold, gleaming, intricate. Meander-patterned hoops, thick bracelets that looked too large for his wrists, and polished armbands—*wrist cuffs,* his mind supplied as he stared at it blankly. Everything about it shimmered like it belonged to someone important. Or someone vain. Or both.

The dove cooed again, this time sounding pleased. It gave a self-satisfied fluff of its feathers, preened once, and stared directly at him. Then repeated the motion, slower.

Pointedly.

Luke got the message loud and clear.

It wanted him to change into the stolen clothes.

But Luke didn't want to change in front of this clearly unnatural bird. He wasn't about to show his *parts* to some overly intelligent dove—especially one that stared like it understood far too much. He didn't even like changing in front of his siblings, let alone something that was very likely divine in nature.

"…Some privacy would be appreciated."

The dove puffed up in clear outrage, then let out an indignant coo before finally tucking its head under its wing in what could barely count as compliance.

Well, that was probably the best he was going to get.

Luke inhaled deeply and got to work, trying to get it over with quickly. He started with the clothes, unfolding the fabric and lifting the garment up to examine it. It was a long, flowing piece—*a chiton,* his mind supplied automatically. Modernized, maybe, but unmistakably modeled after the ancient style, the kind women used to wear. The second piece was a belt or sash—*a zōnē,* Chiron's voice echoed in the back of his mind—adorned with laurel designs.

It was… pretty.

Luke figured the two would look decent together.

He set his bag down on the ground before peeling off his Camp shirt and sweatpants, then tugged the chiton over his head, adjusting the fabric and smoothing it down. Unease prickled in his chest as he realized how perfectly it fit—reaching his ankles, tailored to his frame without being too tight or too loose.

Like it had been made for him.

He swallowed that thought down, picked up the sash, and tried to figure out how to tie it.

It took longer than he wanted.

The dove, clearly growing impatient, started making irritated cooing noises behind its wing.

"Alright, alright…" he muttered, wrapping the sash clumsily around his waist and fumbling to knot it in the back. It took a few tries, but he managed.

Awkward, but it held.

"You can look now."

The dove immediately lifted its head from beneath its wing, tilting it to one side as it studied him. Then it gave a few little hops—left, right—and let out a coo that sounded suspiciously like disapproval.

Luke frowned, about to say something, but before the words could leave his mouth, the dove spread its wings.

And then it hit him.

A wave of something—power, unmistakable and ancient—rolled over his skin like silk and rose petals, like the brush of the softest perfume-scented veil. It was temptation made tangible, something warm, velvety, and dangerously inviting.

But it lasted only a heartbeat.

Just long enough for him to blink.

And in that split second, something had changed—or rather, *his clothes* had.

The awkwardly tied sash was now snug around his waist, perfectly positioned. The chiton draped more artfully, folding just enough over the belt to draw attention to how slim his waist was. The jewelry had somehow fastened itself onto him—gleaming on his upper arms, wrists, and, with a startled glance downward, he realized, even his ankles.

Unsettled, Luke shot a glance at the dove, who was now cooing with an air of smug satisfaction. It bobbed its head in what looked suspiciously like a nod, then took flight, circling him once with a sharp trill—commanding in a way no bird had any right to sound.

*This… this is too strange,* Luke thought, crouching slowly, letting the fabric settle around him as he picked up his bag. *But she's helping me—I think.*

He stood, the motion smooth and careful, one hand running down his legs to straighten the folds of the chiton.

And then he followed the bird. Again.

He'd been doing that a lot, following this strange little creature. But Luke was lost. This dove was the only guidance he had—and after that flash of divine power, the way the clothing had shifted and arranged itself without his help, he doubted ignoring it would end well.

He stepped out of the house—

And froze.

Because he saw exactly where the bird was guiding him.

Not away from the edge of the city, not toward the safety of the meadow or the forest, where he could slip away unnoticed at the first sign of danger.

No, the dove was leading him straight into the city.

Down wide marble staircases that shimmered in the light, past open courtyards and terraced rooftops, and toward an open space that stretched out toward the sea.

A dock.

Luke's stomach dropped.

There were ships and boats of every shape and size moored there, and bustling around them were dozens—no, a crowd—of brightly uniformed women. Or girls, maybe, he registered absently. From this distance, it was hard to tell.

Some held what looked like clipboards. Others moved with clear purpose, checking things off or giving instructions.

And all Luke could think was—*I'm fucked.*

Aphrodite's dove pivoted midair, circled him once more, then took off in the direction of the dock, only to double back and repeat the motion when he didn't immediately follow.

So he followed.

His steps felt a little numb—maybe from sheer overwhelm, like his brain had short-circuited and was slipping into survival autopilot. He was male, and this bird was leading him *straight* to Circe's people?

Jesus. He was going to be turned into a pig. He could *see* it, feel it, like his destiny was trotting toward him with a curly tail and hooves.

Delicately, he placed one hand on the smooth marble railing of the staircase and lifted the edge of his chiton with the other. The motion came naturally, pulled from muscle memory that didn't belong to this life—but fit him all the same.

His mind scrambled, trying to rationalize, to figure out a way out of this pig-curse mess.

He was wearing a chiton. A *woman's* style chiton. Aphrodite herself—or something close enough—had dressed him in it. He didn't have a mirror, no idea how he looked. Could he pass? Could they believe he belonged here?

*Calm down,* he told himself.

He'd been a woman in his last life. Maybe… maybe that counted for something. He didn't know.

But he hoped. Desperately.

And he really, *really* hoped this smug little divine chicken wasn't guiding him to his doom. Not after all the dramatic flair it had put into getting him into this outfit.

And… okay, Luke had to admit—he didn't hate it.

It was pretty. And comfortable. Flowing.

He didn't know what he looked like now.

But he *hoped* it was pretty.

It was the least this whole clownery could afford him—if he was going to be doomed, then let him at least look like a heavenly vision while it happened.

Seriously.

Luke took a very deep breath as he spotted the bird perched smugly on a wooden pillar near the dock, hopping in place like it was proud of itself.

Under his breath, he muttered, “I hope a cat eats you.”

His eyes flicked warily to the women and girls darting back and forth across the dock, greeting passengers as they stepped off the ships. It didn’t take long for Luke to realize they were separating the men from the women.

Luke didn’t like it. Not at all.

Naturally—and very sneakily—he edged along the outer curve of the crowd, circling wide until he found an opening. A group of what looked like lost tourists huddled around a tall teenager with olive-toned skin and long, glossy black hair pulled back into a neat braid. She was clearly distracted, flipping through some kind of clipboard, her expression pinched with frustration as more people piled in.

Perfect.

Luke didn’t hesitate. He slipped in fast, fluid, weaving through the chaos and planting himself among the cluster so seamlessly that no one noticed he hadn’t been there from the start.

Just one more face in the crowd.

Exactly how he liked it.

He kept standing there like he belonged, hands neatly folded in front of him, eyes calm and passive as he watched the scene unfold around him.

The women were gently led away by the workers, voices full of honeyed promises—comfort, rest, indulgence, everything taken care of. The men, on the other hand, were guided somewhere else entirely. Quiet words exchanged. *The owner would like to speak with you,* or something just vague enough to sound polite, but not optional.

Luke’s face didn’t so much as twitch. But beneath the calm, his skin buzzed with unease, nerves itching like they were trying to crawl out from under him. He wanted to run. Desperately.

But he stayed.

And he watched.

Waited.

Until finally, it was his turn.

“Welcome,” the girl greeted, her smile a little too tight around the edges. Luke noticed it immediately. She was young—sixteen, maybe seventeen, no older than eighteen. Overwhelmed, probably, by the sheer number of people. Understandable.

She extended a hand to him for a greeting.

He stared at it for a beat, then reached out and returned the gesture delicately, his fingers curling lightly around hers.

Clearing his throat, he softened his voice—he knew how to adjust it, how to smooth out the edges, make it gentler.

“…Hello,” he said softly.

The girl’s shoulders loosened just slightly, her expression easing as she looked him over—eyes flicking from his face to his clothes, then back again. She smiled, friendly and tentative, like she was trying to make him feel comfortable.

“I really like your clothes,” she said.

And Luke recognized it.

That small bridge of girlhood offered in a handful of words. A gesture of connection, quiet and simple.

It wasn’t strange.

It settled into him like something familiar. Something that had always been there, even if he hadn’t noticed it in a long time. And underneath that familiarity came a soft wave of relief—though he knew he wasn’t safe yet, not really.

Still, he smiled. Just a little.

“Thank you,” he murmured. “You have beautiful hair.”

She blushed faintly, fingers instinctively brushing over her braid. “Oh—thanks. Yours is really pretty too. I always wished I had wavy hair.”

Luke let out a quiet huff of laughter, something amused sparking in his eyes. “Straight hair’s easier. Less drama in the mornings.”

She giggled at that, then straightened slightly, placing a hand over her chest with effortless grace. “I’m Hylla. And you?”

*Hylla.*

Luke paused, just for a moment. The future queen of the Amazons. He knew her—Roman. Strong. Important. But young now. Just a girl, still growing into what she’d become.

He brushed the thought aside, tilting his head slightly as he spoke a name he hadn't said aloud in years—not since his new life began, when he stopped being who he was and became someone else entirely.

"Lúcia."

"Lúcia?" Hylla repeated, trying it out with clear interest, something like excitement lighting up her face. "Where you from? Latina?"

"Brazilian."

Luke felt something like relief sweep through him—but he didn't let it show.

Instead, he leaned into the grace, into the ease of the moment. Wore the confidence like a second skin. Like he belonged.

Hylla grinned. "I'm from Puerto Rico, so…" She shifted her weight, just a little, her smile faltering as something flickered across her face. Her eyes went distant for a heartbeat before she tucked it away and straightened again.

Luke felt a pang, low and sharp. He knew what that look meant. He knew her past—details he had no right to know. But he knew them anyway.

And maybe, just maybe, he could offer something gentle back.

"Could you tell me about this place?" he asked, nodding toward the terraced buildings rising up the mountain, then glancing back at her with a quiet, easy smile. "You seem like you know your way around. And, well… Latinas stick together, don't we?"

Hylla's eyes lit up, the shadow that had flickered across her face moments ago beginning to fade. "We do," she said, her voice light, her smile small and a little shy—still young, still warm.

She straightened, clutching her clipboard to her chest, and gestured for him to follow. For a second, she nearly skipped forward—catching herself just in time. Her expression shifted as she remembered the line still behind Luke.

She scrunched her face, thoughtful for a beat, then turned sharply and marched over to another girl nearby. The two exchanged a few rapid, half-hissed words before Hylla pulled back with a victorious smile.

Returning to Luke, she beamed, eyes bright with excitement.

"Come on! I'll show you everything—you're gonna love it here!"

Following after her, sweeped up in the excitment, Luke did.

They climbed the same marble staircase he'd descended earlier, Hylla chattering beside him, her voice animated and full of energy.

“This is a safe place for women and girls,” she said, gesturing broadly. “And the education’s really good, too.”

She glanced at him then—at his face, at the way his chiton fell—and her smile widened a bit.

“I’m sure you already know this,” she added, “but Our Lady offers a great program to study magic. To really understand the Mist, how it works, how to use it.”

That caught Luke’s attention.

“That does sound interesting,” he murmured, adjusting the strap of his bag over his shoulder with practiced ease, tilting his head slightly as his gaze drifted.

The fountains glittered under the sunlight, casting fractured reflections across the stone. But it wasn’t just the water that caught his eye.

Scattered across the landscape were animals—lions lounging in the shade, wolves curled up like sleepy dogs, foxes darting through flower beds, even bears lumbering slowly past marble columns. All of them too calm. Too tame.

They moved like house pets, not wild beasts.

*Beasts that were once men,* Luke thought.

He looked away.

“It is!” Hylla continued, oblivious to his momentary quiet. “And it’s really inclusive. We welcome everyone—mortals, demigods, nymphs. As long as you’re a girl, you’re accepted here.”

Luke gave a soft hum in response, a quiet, rhythmic sound that passed for agreement.

And honestly… it did sound like a good place. For women, at least. A sanctuary. A place where they could be safe, learn, grow. That part he couldn’t argue with.

He just didn’t love what it meant for anyone else.

Still, there was something undeniably comforting about it. Something that felt like security.

“I see,” he said, voice gentle. “It really does sound like a good place to live.”

Hylla nodded, her smile growing softer. “It is. Our Lady took me and my sister in when we first got here. We’ve learned a lot since then. It’s a good place—really.”

She hesitated for a beat, then glanced at him, something shy and hopeful flickering in her eyes.

“Maybe… if you wanted, I could talk to her for you? Our Lady, I mean. I could even go with you.”

Then, catching herself, she added quickly, “Only if you want me to, of course!”

Luke froze on the inside, even as his face remained calm, composed, carefully unreadable. Hylla was watching him with open, expectant eyes—soft, sincere. Vulnerable in a way that made something in him twist.

*What now?*

What was the right move?

They believed he was female. That was the illusion he was surviving on. But what if they found out? What would happen then?

He had no boat. No escape plan. No allies on this island, except maybe a smug little dove that had vanished as soon as he’d stepped into the crowd. The Sea of Monsters was vast, and somewhere out there, the kids were still missing. How was he supposed to find them? How was he supposed to help anyone if he couldn’t even help himself?

He didn’t know what path to take. He only knew he had to choose one that let him live long enough to figure the rest out.

For now, he was Lúcia. A girl who’d come to Circe’s island. A student. A stranger looking for safety. That was the mask—and he had to wear it well.

So he smiled—soft, hesitant, practiced.

“That’s really kind of you,” he said, voice gentle. “I appreciate it.”

Then he sighed, a quiet breath that came out lighter than it felt, something fragile beneath the surface.

“But… I’m still not sure yet.”

Hylla’s smile dipped slightly, but she recovered quickly, words tumbling out in a rush. “That’s totally fine! You don’t have to decide anything now. Maybe just…” She shuffled her feet a little. “Just a conversation. I know a few things, but I’m still a student too. Our Lady would explain it way better than I could.”

“That sounds fair,” Luke said softly, folding his hands in front of him with quiet elegance. Then he tilted his head slightly, letting a small smile tug at his lips. “But for now, you’re the one showing me around, aren’t you? And I think you’re doing a pretty good job.”

Hylla flushed at the compliment, straightening with a spark of shy pride as her fingers fidgeted with the end of her braid. “Well… there’s still a lot I haven’t shown you yet. After that, you can meet Our Mistress and let her handle the boring stuff.”

“Then maybe you should keep showing me,” Luke said with a soft giggle, lifting a hand to his mouth in a graceful gesture.

Hylla giggled too, then turned and began leading him around the island.

Luke followed, quiet but attentive.

He had to admit—it really *was* beautiful. The harmony of it, the sheer aesthetic perfection. Everything here felt designed, intentional. A paradise carved out of wilderness, hidden far from civilization.

But even paradise could be built on bones.

Hylla chatted beside him, gesturing as she talked them through gardens, courtyards, and water-lined walkways until they stopped beside a marble fountain. Water poured in delicate streams into a pool of crystal-clear blue.

They sat on the stone edge, Luke's chiton gathered up to his thighs so he could dip his feet in the cool water.

She was telling him about her little sister—about when they first arrived here, how they spent days running wild through the island, splashing in every pool, eating fruit right off the trees. How Reyna once slipped and almost broke a tooth and cried so hard she had snot down to her chin.

Luke laughed, warm and real, the kind that settled in his chest and stayed there.

Then came the lull.

A stretch of silence where neither of them spoke—just the soft sound of running water, birds in the distance, the kind of quiet that only exists in safe places.

That's when he saw it.

Movement, just at the edge of his vision.

He didn't react at first, but Hylla tensed beside him. He felt her fingers curl around his wrist, tugging gently.

And then it stepped into view.

A wolf. Or maybe a dog. Luke tilted his head slightly, taking it in. Its features were softer than the wolves he'd seen on TV—more rounded, the eyes less wild. Maybe a hybrid? A wolfdog? He wasn't sure. The coloring threw him off, too—warm brown, almost golden in the light, like the *caramelos** back home in Brazil.

It didn't growl. Didn't bare its teeth. It stood still, head low, gaze lifted up from beneath its brow—submissive, maybe. Or something else.

Hylla kept her eyes locked on it, never once turning her back.

"Come on," she said, voice low but firm. "Let's leave."

"Already?" Luke whispered, dread rising like ice water in his veins. His nerves surged back full force, crashing into him like a truck.

He didn’t want to be turned into a pig.

“Yes,” Hylla said, still focused on the animal. “Let’s go. Slowly.”

“Why?” he whispered, already mirroring her careful steps. He wasn’t eager to find out how fast a wolf could move on marble.

“That one’s not like the others,” she murmured, her face tight. Then, catching herself—maybe remembering she was still trying to make him *want* to stay—she added quickly, “But don’t worry. He’s not much trouble. Just a little… wilder. So we have to be more careful.”

Wilder?

Luke glanced back at the wolf.

It hadn’t moved, just stood there watching them, head tilted in that oddly thoughtful way—something he recognized.

*Pipo used to look at him like that.*

Not aggressive. Not feral. Just curious. Studying. Trying to understand.

It didn’t look wild to him.

But then they stepped out of the quiet place, leaving the fountain and the crystalline pool behind, and the marble streets stretched ahead once more. Luke didn’t have time to dwell on the animal.

Because now he had a much bigger problem.

“I think we can go see Our Lady now,” Hylla said brightly, leading the way. “She’s usually in her office around this time. And I’ve shown you almost everything, so… there’s not much else left to explain.”

Luke followed, his smile stretched too tight, held in place like it might shatter if he blinked wrong.

*Oh God.*

He hoped God, the saints, every power in heaven and earth was on his side.

He was going to need all the help he could get if he was going to survive a conversation with Circe—without leaving the room oinking.

Chapter End Notes

Caramelos: caramels (stray dogs in Br that are named that for the color of their fur)

So… a dove shows up and forces Luke to wear his pretty clothes, lol. I really liked the design I came up with, so I wanted to incorporate it a little. Also, it's pretty obvious the dove is Aphrodite, so… apparently their prayers worked? But will she have more of a role? And is she helping the others—or helping at all? We'll see…

He's so pretty!

/>

Anyway, Luke's last-life name is finally revealed: Lúcia. It's essentially the same name—coincidences, huh? And Hylla's here! Some sisterhood moments and the start of a new friendship. I really enjoyed writing this part. Hylla thinks Luke—er, Lúcia—is actually a cool older girl she can look up to and is totally giving older-sister vibes, lol. Also: wild wolf alert! Though it's suspiciously well-behaved… Hylla is Not Convinced.

Anyway! Thank you all for reading! I read and appreciate every single comment, even when I can't reply right away (life's been hectic and I've been sick lately).

So… do you think the meeting with Circe will go well?

# Chapter 61: SoM - Circe

Chapter Summary

> The meeting with Circe happens, and Luke is sweating bullets behind a pretty smile. Somehow... it goes well?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Luke was trying very hard to keep his cool, if slightly stiff, smile in place. Hands neatly crossed in front of him as he walked—gliding like a breeze over salt-stained water, the fabric of his chiton swishing artfully against his legs.

The picture of elegance.

Grace in human form.

Delicate and dignified and classy—all perfect feminine characteristics Luke wore with ease, slipping into this routine like he'd never left it. Like welcoming a dear old friend after years apart. As natural as putting on the same clothes every morning.

Easy.

*But I don't know if that woman will be fooled,* Luke thought darkly, the only outward sign of his distress a twitch of his fingers—smoothed away with practiced ease. Smooth. Effortless

*You're elegance made physical. You're grace and classiness and beauty—*

*Jesus Christ.* Luke breathed in slowly, attempting to calm the buzzing under his skin.

In and out.

Again.

It did nothing.

Luke remained the same anxious, nervous wreck of a—very anatomically accurate—male, attempting to infiltrate the island of the witch-goddess Circe with a pretty smile tucked behind his hand.

Like that would successfully change his *parts*.

As if he weren't sweating bullets behind the polished mask.

As if he weren't infinitely ready to lift the hem of this stolen (divine boon…?) chiton and bolt toward the horizon like an unwilling bride.

*By the grace of God,* he repeated, for the hundredth miserable step. *I'm fucked—there's no way a millennium old witch gets fooled by some random pretty boy in a dress.*

*Fucked.*

A catastrophe of divine proportions, perfectly suited to the flaming shitshow that was his life.

*Calm. You're as serene as a still lake. Very calm. You're not scared—*

What was it the women in Dune said again?

He furrowed his brows, internal gears grinding as he tried to summon the memory—blurry from a life already lived and died. Then, like a light flickering somewhere at the back of his mind, the quote came back to him.

*Fear is the mind killer. The little death—something something. I don't remember the rest,* Luke chanted to himself.

It did absolutely nothing.

He felt like cursing out loud but bit his tongue before the… impolite words could pry his mouth open and traumatize the impressionable young minds around him.

Well. Just the one.

Sneaking a glance out of the corner of his eye, he saw Hylla walking ahead, quiet. Every so often she would glance back, a small frown drawing her brows together, before shaking her head and returning her gaze to the path ahead.

It had happened several times now.

"Is something the matter, Hylla?" he asked, watching as some man-turned-fox frolicked near a patch of berry bushes a few meters ahead.

*It was once a man,* his mind informed him primly, as the red fox gave a vigorous shake (*very fluffy*—Luke's fingers twitched with the urge to sink into the fur) and made a distinctly foxy noise before looping away.

He slammed the thought aside.

Still. It remained unnerving—knowing the truth soiled the dream, made it less perfect.

Suffering hidden beneath pretty sheets was still suffering: open wounds, quietly festering from neglect.

"No," she said too quickly, jolting like she'd been shocked. The smile she gave him was a little too stiff at the edges, her brows drawn with an almost confused crease.

She looked… off. Maybe tense. Maybe puzzled. Maybe both. Like something wasn't quite sitting right behind her eyes.

"Are you sure?" Luke asked softly. Then, quieter, "If you don't want to talk, that's fine. You're helping me. If I can offer the same…"

"It's nothing important," Hylla replied, and the tension in her shoulders began to ease—bit by bit—the further they went. But she stayed thoughtful, chewing at her lower lip before muttering,

"It's just—I've never seen him act so mellow before."

She pursed her lips.

"As if he weren't an insane wild beast."

*He?*

"…You mean the wolf?" Luke asked, watching her carefully from the corner of his eye.

A wild wolf—*insane*, she'd said—in a place full of glazed, stumbling man-animals. That was strange. That was… wrong.

A man who kept his soul? Or a mind that didn't get lost all the way, even when the rest of him did?

Either way, it stuck with him.

And it deserved sympathy.

No one deserved this. Not really.

"Yeah. That one's—" she paused, scrunching up her face like the words were hard to find. "A piece of work. He never wanted to join the packs. He always snarls at us."

She made a face.

"He even bit Jade once. She just tried to pet him and he tore up her hand. Our Mistress brewed some potions to fix it and then she… did something to him. But it never stuck."

"Seems like a dangerous one," Luke said lightly, watching her face. "Especially with how big that wolf is. Maybe some house training's in order?"

Fishing, really. Quietly.

Hylla snorted. "Oh, no. One of the girls would lose a chunk of themselves if they even tried. The Lady couldn't fix him—what chance do we have?"

*Circe couldn't?*

“He only acts like that when he’s near the others,” she continued, shrugging like it wasn’t much. “Us, the other wolves, the animals here—doesn’t matter. He keeps to himself. So the Mistress lets him stay.”

What a surprise.

Luke would’ve thought she’d have sacrificed the mutt already, written him off as a lost cause.

Then again, maybe that would’ve ruined the point.

Not that he really knew—or cared to know—what her reasons were.

“At least he doesn’t go out of his way to cause trouble?” Luke offered.

Internally, though, he wasn’t so sure that kind of behavior was unwarranted. Being forced to live as a pet was humiliating. So yeah—he got it. But tearing up the island of the witch who transformed you in the first place?

Not smart.

Then again… under these circumstances…

Hylla nodded, then added more quietly, “Jade says maybe he came from a life where he never knew safety. That’s why he’s like that.”

She frowned, muttering under her breath, “Personally? I think he’s just crazy. Something scrambled in that messed-up doggy head.”

“That’s unfortunate,” Luke said. “He’s very fluffy.”

Hylla huffed a laugh. “He is! Reyna tried to pet him once. I had to drag her away before she lost a hand.”

She kept talking, but Luke’s mind had already wandered.

The man had come here broken. That much was clear. The transformation didn’t cause it—though *maybe* it jostled something looser.

*A life without safety*...

Luke turned the words over slowly.

They felt important. Like a central piece. But he didn’t have enough information to see the full picture yet.

He could find more—

Assuming he didn’t turn into a pig first.

He slowed when the building came into view.

Hylla passed him with a smile and a toss of her head, probably thinking he was stunned by the architecture.

Which—*sure*. It was pretty.

A palace. Big. Greek. Predictably made of the same marble that crawled over the island like moss. Too many columns, and ivy growing everywhere like it had a mind of its own. More damning: the shimmer. Definitely magical.

But no. It was simpler than that.

Luke was trembling in his boots.

*Where's that dove when I need it?* he thought sourly.

Aphrodite's little symbol had dropped him in the middle of this man-hating spa and disappeared like she expected him to handle it solo.

Yeah, Luke was capable.

But a little divine support wouldn't hurt. Now, preferably. Meeting-Circe level emergency.

*Fucking chicken. I hope you get eaten. And I hope you don't taste good either.*

"Come on, Lúcia. This way," Hylla called over her shoulder, stepping through the entrance—two massive columns flanking the doorway, ivy wrapped around them in elegant spirals, like it had been sculpted that way.

Luke's feet just moved, padding softly on the stone floor, his face a careful mask of neutrality. Inside, though, his mind was a knot of half-baked escape plans—most of which would probably just get him turned into a pig faster.

His eyes flicked to the interior.

Very aesthetic. Like Greek nobility had kissed up to a wildwood witch and decided that was the vibe.

It was what he expected—marble, polished surfaces, long corridors with wide arches that let in soft light and glimpses of garden. But there were herbs everywhere, hanging in dried bunches from the ceiling, tucked into corners, packed into clay bowls and amphorae that smelled like old smoke and bitter roots. Symbols carved along the walls in thin, precise lines—layered over each other like someone had etched and re-etched them over the years.

Luke had felt it the moment he stepped inside. Something brushing his skin—soft, but impossibly heavy.

It made the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. Made him clench his hands tighter in front of him.

He glanced at the walls out of the corner of his eye.

Hylla didn't seem to notice. Or maybe she'd stopped noticing a long time ago.

The carvings barely glowed—just enough to feel ordinary. But they buzzed. Power thick in the air, bending things slightly off-center.

Or maybe not bending.

Maybe just… opening.

Like a door.

One that made the impossible feel the slightest bit closer.

"It's here," Hylla said, soft—almost a whisper—as she gestured him forward.

She stopped in front of a wooden door.

Intricate. Carvings twisting across the surface like a story being told—figures, animals, symbols. Like it held whispers in a language Luke didn't know how to read.

He breathed in deep. Heart pounding in his chest, through his ribs, down to his feet—like lightning trying to root him in place.

*Run. Run. Run.*

But he was already here.

And there was nowhere to run to.

Luke stepped forward.

Got closer, tension high on his shoulders—something he couldn't fully hide. Hylla smiled at him, light and quick, her hand brushing his in a soft squeeze.

"It's okay," she whispered. "She's nice. I'll do the talking. Everything's gonna be fine, you'll see."

He smiled.

Or tried to.

Then followed when she tugged him along, her steps confident and loud while his own seemed to try and sink into the floor, as if silence could stop any of this.

The moment he crossed the threshold, it hit him. Not violently—no. Just a shift, like pressure against his skin. Subtle, quiet, but unmistakable. The kind of weight that sat beneath the surface of things. Power—real, cloying. Like he'd walked into a space folded in on itself, tucked into the world and entirely hers.

Everything hummed.

And Luke didn't need to be told.

*This was Circe's.*

He gulped, throat dry, heart pounding in his skull—chasing away every thought, every plan, until all that remained was a blank, buzzing kind of fear. Numbness clawed at the edges, slow and heavy, like it wanted to drag him under.

But Hylla's hand was still wrapped around his, steady, and she kept walking.

So Luke's legs moved too.

Even if his mind felt like it was scrambling through sand.

*I'm here. I can't run. Not anymore.*

The thought looped in his head, over and over, as he followed—barely aware of his own movement.

"Lady Circe," Hylla's voice cut through his thoughts, sharp and sudden, snapping him out of his stunned, panic-numbed daze.

"We have a new arrival. Lúcia—"

She kept speaking, but Luke wasn't listening anymore.

His eyes had locked onto the woman seated behind the table.

There were trinkets laid out in neat little lines, herbs stacked to the side, cups with smoke curling up from them like living things. Incense. Seeds. Flowers. A pestle still resting in a clay bowl, green staining the tips of her fingers like she'd just crushed something fresh.

Circe was a woman with medium brown skin, gold beneath the surface, like it ran bone-deep. Her hair was pale, like strings of sunlight dulled with ash, bound into a high, bubbled ponytail—confident and wild, like structure wrangled out of chaos. It was tangled with leaves and sticks and—

Luke's eyes flicked up—quick.

*Bone.*

It was there, half-hidden in her hair, but he saw it. He knew what he saw.

Then her gaze shifted to him.

Golden. Pupiless. Sharp. Endless.

*Knowing.*

A smile curled on her painted lips, slow and precise. Like just seeing him had cracked him open, secrets spilling to the floor like water from a broken vase.

“Lúcia,” she tasted the name on her tongue, like testing the weight of it—eyes still fixed on him. “She who brings light.”

She tilted her head, ponytail shifting over one shoulder like a slow wave. Her nails—neatly manicured, sharp—tapped the table once. Then she hummed, low and thoughtful, and began to move, unhurried, from behind the table.

Luke tensed despite himself, hands still folded neatly in front of him, his face locked in practiced neutrality. She moved like a lion—no, not even stalking. Like one that had already caught its prey.

Circe stopped in front of him, and Luke flicked his eyes up.

She was tall. But gods were never small. A daughter of a Titan even less so—too much power forced into a shell, so the shell got bigger.

Lampetia and Phaethousa had been tall too. But Circe was something else.

Not just more.

*Other.*

Witch-goddess.

“How sweet,” she said, voice light—almost amused. “Hylla’s grown attached already. There’s something lovely about bonds formed between women. They rarely require permission.”

Beside him, Hylla shuffled. Some embarrassed sound caught in her throat, but Circe only smiled, tapping her forehead with one sharp, painted nail.

“No need to be shy, Hylla. It’s a good thing.”

Then her gaze turned to Luke.

Held.

Measured.

Smiled again.

Unnerving.

“I’ll speak with our guest alone,” she said.

*What?*

Luke’s heart lurched—he could feel it in his throat.

Alone. With Circe.

“But—” Hylla started.

“It won’t take long,” Circe said gently.

Which could mean anything.

Like turning him into a pig between one breath and the next.

The door opened by itself. Luke flinched.

Circe hadn’t moved. Still stood with her arms folded, hands tucked at the elbows. A sheer veil draped over her arms, glinting like mist threaded with gold. At the edges—symbols. Small, flickering, hard to read.

But they were there.

The same shimmer glowed faintly across the corset at her waist—thin gold lines stitched into green, blinking in and out like breath. Words. Or something trying to be words.

*Unnatural.*

Hylla gave him a small smile and a quick squeeze of the hand before she started to move—too slow, hesitant.

Circe let out a soft, amused hum.

“Hylla,” she said, tone mild. “Feet are for walking. Don’t drag them like you’ve not been taught better.”

Then the door shut.

Soft. Final. The kind of sound that echoed louder than it should have.

Just him. And Circe.

She moved—gliding, not walking. Her dress swept around her bare feet, fabric sighing against stone. Something about her didn’t belong in the world, and yet here she was. Real. Present. The air buzzed faintly where she passed, a static hum that didn’t settle.

She stopped in front of her table, back still turned to him. Fingers moved through bundles of herbs, sorting with a precision that felt ritualistic. Then she began to hum—low and tuneless, old. The kind of sound that felt like it didn't come from men.

It itched under his skin.

Magic. She breathed it like it lived in her lungs.

*Witch.*

*Is she picking the herbs that’ll turn me into something small and edible?* he thought, dazed.

He didn’t move.

Couldn’t.

It felt like if he shifted even slightly, the room would tilt and he’d fall right out of it.

“Lúcia,” she said again, slow—still tasting the name like a puzzle on her tongue. “You haven’t spoken.”

She straightened, glancing at him over her shoulder. Her golden eye caught the low light, glinting like the eye of a big cat—quiet, dissecting.

Luke’s chest squeezed. Something small curled under his skin—rabbit-small, cornered. Still, he forced the words out. “I… don’t speak much.”

Circe didn’t answer. She kept staring, her gaze sweeping over him again, slow and unreadable. Then she hummed—a soft sound, almost thoughtful. Her hands stilled. She turned to face him fully, resting against the edge of her table. Calm. Composed. Watching.

It was intimidating.

“You have such a deep voice, dear,” she said lightly. “Rare, in my girls.”

Her tone was soft, but her eyes didn’t blink. Didn’t look away.

Luke froze. The back of his neck prickled. Cold sweat gathered at his nape, and his eyes dropped. His hands twitched, just slightly.

*Did she—?*

“I—I—” he started, but the words caught. Lodged deep in his throat.

She didn’t stop looking. Didn’t move. Her golden eyes cut through him.

“It… just happened,” he managed, voice barely there. “I don’t—” He stopped.

She saw through him.

Not just into him—*through*.

Like the truth he’d buried to keep going was already laid bare in front of her.

Circe hummed again, a sound more shape than voice. Then she extended her hand—slowly, deliberately.

“Let’s try one little test,” she said, voice soft as silk. “Shall we?”

Luke’s body lurched—not physically, no. It was like being yanked forward by something inside him, a cold touch he barely felt.

*Not like Mercury,* he catalogued—*so unlike Mercury.*

This thing moved through him like a tourist seeing the sights, foreign and inquisitive, leaving no footprints, only a vague, crawling wrongness.

Then it pulled.

Light as a whisper, sly as a rat, it threaded out of him, skittering through his veins like water through a broken pipe.

He blinked, eyes widening, just as a strand of light emerged from his chest—brilliant and glowing—drawn straight to Circe's outstretched hand.

It coalesced there in her palm, forming a sphere that pulsed, alive and indignant, its peach-blue shimmer rippling like disturbed water.

She reached in and drew a thread from it—if it could be called that. Something glowing, fine, and trembling in the air. A part of him. Luke felt it stretch, not from his body exactly, but from somewhere deeper. It hovered in the space around her, delicate and lit with that same hue.

Her presence shifted.

He felt it rise—calm, deliberate, practiced.

*Unknowable*.

And then she did something. A twist. A flicker. A pulse.

He had no words for it.

Luke couldn't explain what happened even if he tried. It moved past comprehension, like a language meant to bypass language. He only knew it felt finished. Refined. Like this was something she'd done thousands of times, in dozens of forms.

Something no other god had done to him. Not even Mercury.

Maybe this was magic.

Real magic.

*Witch*.

"Poor thing," Circe cooed, studying the fragile glow of mortality like it wasn't something she could crush whenever she pleased. "Living a life built on hiding—on silencing your own truth."

She looked at Luke and smiled—radiant, warm, almost tender. The coldness she'd carried melted into something softer. But it wasn't safer. It was beautiful the way poison is beautiful. Like the wolf's bane he'd seen earlier in the garden—quiet, and fatal.

The kind of danger you didn't notice until it was already too late.

“But I *see* you,” she said.

Luke’s wide eyes flicked to her.

“What do you mean?” he whispered.

Her smile didn’t change. Still tilted, almost motherly, as she looked at the pulse of mortality hanging between them. She regarded it with something like fondness, then flicked one finger —barely a motion—and the thread folded neatly back into the glowing sphere.

She lifted it, and the light drifted toward him. It sank into his chest like a drop of water into the ocean. Seamless. Like it had never left.

Luke blinked. The hum in his skin lingered.

Circe turned and moved toward a darker corner of the room—gliding more than walking. Only then did he notice the chair nestled in shadow, a wide green chair carved in soft curves. He hadn’t seen it. He hadn’t seen the glass wall behind it either.

A piece of the sea, held here.

She settled into the chair with practiced ease, crossing one leg over the other. Her dress caught the dim light, gold thread flickering brighter in the dark—like something alive, breathing with her.

“You’re not the first, dear,” she said, calm as ever.

Her head tilted slightly. Her eyes glinted—soft, ancient, entirely sure.

“But here, you don’t have to explain yourself. Here, you’re safe. This is a refuge from the world men made cruel.”

Luke’s throat bobbed. He kept staring at her, like he didn’t quite understand.

He was still himself. Not a pig. Not a beast. Still standing. And Circe was speaking to him like he was one of her girls—one of her students, maybe even already accepted.

He didn’t understand.

But he was alive.

Still whole. Still himself.

He wasn’t going to test it.

His fingers twitched once. “I—am I accepted?” he asked softly. “As a student?”

Circe laughed—quiet and warm, like a knife sliding into water. “Of course, dear.”

She shifted in her seat, crossing her legs again. When she spoke again, her voice held a firmer edge beneath the softness.

“Our work is demanding,” she said. “But meaningful. We accept all girls—from any path, any shape, any beginning. What matters is intent. Willingness. Hunger.”

She lifted a single finger.

The air around it folded, her aura bending the Mist with something quieter than force. The texture of the room shifted. A ripple. A pulse. The hint of something older than magic.

Then the illusion bloomed: a man—mouth open, limbs twisting, body reshaping into a wolf. Not clean. Not painless.

Luke swallowed hard.

“To study the Mist,” Circe continued, “is to study truth. To see what lives beneath form—and to learn how to shape it.”

She smiled again, this time with something close to delight.

“But I expect effort.”

Luke opened his mouth to reply—though he wasn’t entirely sure what was going to come out. His mind still felt like it was scrambling to catch up with whatever had just happened.

But—

Something moved in the tank.

*Big.*

*A flash of teeth in the dark.*

Luke’s head whipped toward it on instinct.

Circe noticed. Her eyebrows lifted, following his gaze with slow, almost lazy curiosity. “Oh? That caught your eye, dear?”

She turned more fully toward the glass, tilting her head as she lounged back in the chair. The water shifted behind it, throwing refracted light across the walls. Something glided just beneath the surface. Further down, bones rested on the sandy floor, scattered like petals.

The tank took up half the room. A piece of the sea grafted into her home. But it wasn’t right.

It was too vast. Too deep. The water shimmered oddly, like space itself was folding inward. Luke squinted, trying to trace the edges. The angles didn’t add up.

Circe caught the hesitation. Smiled.

*Pleased*.

“You’re gifted,” she said, voice like silk laid over thorns. “I can tell already—you’ll take to your lessons beautifully.”

Luke managed a smile, frail-thin and uncertain.

Circe sighed, as if remembering a child long lost.

“Here dwells one of the most quietly treacherous things ever to crawl through my sanctuary.”

She turned her gaze to the glass, where her reflection lay layered—beautiful, mysterious, and terrible.

“Slipped into my paradise looking like one of mine,” she said, voice lilting, “but I always knew. Something was wrong with that one. A beast in bloom. A snake among my flowers.”

She tilted her head again, thoughtfully.

“It’s a mercy, really. What I did. To show him what he was.”

The tank made no sound. But something moved, slowly, in the dark.

*He?*

Another man turned into a beast?

Luke flicked his eyes back to the tank, searching the dark water for more trace of movement. But there was nothing. Whatever had been there was still now—hidden, or watching.

*Cruel,* he thought. Worse than the others. At least the fox could run, could breathe the open air. This one was trapped. Caged in glass. No path but circles.

His eyes lingered a second too long.

*Strange,* he thought. *Why had she said he looked like one of hers?*

He froze.

The thought struck too close to home.

Had she meant… a man pretending? A boy in a dress?

*Someone like—*

“Well,” Circe said, her voice soft as silk as she rose in a single, fluid motion. “You’ll be housed in House Four. There’s another girl there already. Delightful. Very gifted.”

She paused. Her eyes drifted back to him—slow, measured. Something dawned behind her gaze, and her lips curled. She raised one hand to hide it, elegant, almost amused.

“You can tell Hylla,” she added. “She knows where it is.”

That brought Luke back—his mind latching onto it like salvation.

“Thank you, Mistress,” he said softly, tilting his head down in what he hoped was a respectful gesture. He felt clumsy. Off-balance. Still reeling from whatever had just happened.

Still reeling from the fact that he was himself. Whole. Unchanged.

*I tricked a goddess,* echoed faintly in the back of his mind.

Luke could hardly believe it.

Circe only smiled.

The door behind him creaked open—on its own, again. The sound scraped at his nerves, and he turned, not running, exactly. He wouldn’t be that obvious. Just… walking briskly. Fast.

Gracefully.

With purpose.

He wasn’t fleeing. He was simply… going to find Hylla. Yes. *That*.

He found her just outside, studying a carved image of a leopard on the wall. She turned at the sound of his footsteps, smiled, and rushed over immediately.

“How did it go?” Hylla asked, clearly excited, flitting around him like a bird with too much energy.

*Weirdly well,* Luke thought. But he didn’t say that.

“It went fine,” he said instead, voice low. “She said I’ll be in House Four? That you’d know where it is?”

Hylla’s grin faltered. Then vanished completely.

“House Four?” she repeated. Her tone had changed—flattened. “With Abigail?”

*Abigail?*

He hadn’t realized he’d said it out loud until Hylla was nodding.

“Yeah,” she said, dragging the word out, her nose wrinkling. “She’s… I mean, she’s good. Just kind of a pain.”

Then quieter, a little pout in her voice, “I wish you’d been placed with me and Reyna. We’ve still got a spare room.”

“We’ll still see each other around,” Luke said, voice even, following after her.

Inside, everything had gone still. Not calm.

*Blank*.

Abigail.

Here.

*His sister was found.*

Chapter End Notes

Soo... here it is! One thing I want to clarify is that Circe is a witch—yeah, she's a goddess, but still very much a witch first, deeply involved in magic, occult practices, and all that stuff. She tends to look "soul-deep," so to speak, and regularly does these kinds of magical tests. It's totally in her lane, magically speaking. Unlike Mercury, who only checked Luke out because he was curious (mostly intrigued by the stranger bits of Luke and trying to figure him out), Circe also notices those oddities, but here she's entirely focused on confirming whether Luke truly is what he appears to be: a woman. The lady has her priorities straight, lol.

To say she realizes Luke is reincarnated would be a stretch, though—Mercury remains the god closest to drawing that particular conclusion.

Anyway, Luke has successfully infiltrated the island, and surprise—Abigail, the missing sister, is here! Lol. She'll make her appearance next chapter, along with some magical world-building and classes, before everything inevitably blows up in everyone's faces.

As always, thank you all so much for reading, and for your lovely comments—I'm genuinely thrilled you're enjoying the story so far!

What did you guys think about the tank?

# Chapter 62: SoM - Sister

Chapter Summary

> Luke and Abigail finally reunite—and clash. She's been off-grid, Hermes knew, and apparently swore on the Styx not to tell.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Greek. More Greek. And even more Greek.

His mind catalogued the aesthetic whiteness with a bunch of flower-heavy bushes like it was a checklist, muttering to itself: *spa, Greek, floral, check.* It was starting to feel like a themed resort (and it kind of was…? It was technically a spa, and it was very Greek, so it fit).

He trailed after Hylla, pretending to serenely take in the scenery like he hadn't already walked through it several times. Like he wasn't using the blooming hedges and blinding-bright marble to distract himself from the fact that he was about to meet his sister.

*His sister.*

Abigail, who had disappeared—and no one had heard from again. No trail. No closure. Nothing. Just gone. And now, somehow, she was *here*. On Circe's island.

Luke wondered if she'd been here the whole time.

He remembered Mr. Asher.

Remembered visiting his grandmother and seeing the man sitting out on the stairs, a plate of food beside him—like Abigail might come walking up the path at any moment. Like he was ready, always, to welcome her home with dinner and a hug.

Luke's heart clenched.

Almost a decade. Seven full years. *Too long.*

He didn't know what to expect. Didn't know what to say. Didn't even know what he was supposed to feel.

He just knew: he didn't know.

He took a breath, slow and deep, air filling his lungs like maybe that would be enough to stand on. Like it could ground him. Like it could calm whatever storm was sizzling under his

skin.

It didn't.

So he kept distracting himself.

His eyes flicked toward one of the packs Hylla had mentioned earlier—man-turned-wolves padding across the marble, quiet and obedient. All of them smaller than the caramel-colored one he'd seen before.

Curious. Maybe that guy was just... big? Different build? Different breed?

Luke frowned.

*Do wolves have breeds?* He was pretty sure it was only subspecies. Then again, he was a demigod, not a veterinarian, so what did he know.

His thoughts were cut off—rather rudely, in his opinion—when Hylla came to a stop.

The house in front of them looked like all the others on the island: as if it had time-traveled from the classical era and been preserved like some ancient relic. Though unlike a museum piece, this one had people living in it.

And a queen. Circe, ruler of this little timeless world, who turned men into animals and made it look like art.

Hylla made a face, squinting toward the entrance, one hand resting on the low outer wall. The number four was carved into the stone—of course in ancient Greek, written neatly as *δ',* like a fashion brand logo, or maybe a boutique sign saying *"we're original Greek, enjoy."*

For a moment, she looked like she was seriously considering knocking the whole thing down. Just to make a point.

*She really doesn't seem to like Abigail,* Luke thought, glancing at her from the corner of his eye.

Then he sighed quietly as the memories came creeping in, uninvited.

Orange Camp shirts, stylishly modified (as she used to say), and hands always full of questionable literature and bent tarot cards. Slammed doors. Moods that took up entire rooms.

Yeah. Abigail had always been… *a figure.* To say the least.

"This one. House Four," Hylla said finally, brow furrowed and mouth twisted like the words tasted bad. She sighed, lifting her hand from the wall as if it disgusted her to touch it.

"It's near the buildings where we take classes," she added, muttering like it was a personal insult. "Better location than mine, even."

No mention of Abigail.

Luke noticed that. With some amusement, yes, though it was dulled, eclipsed by the heavy pounding of his heart against his ribs.

“Let’s just go—see if that big-headed, grumpy crystal ball whisperer is actually here and not eviscerating some poor animal or staring at the sky like the birds are going to tell her the secrets of the universe,” Hylla huffed.

Then she just walked in, stepping past the low outer wall and into the corridor beyond. Luke followed, a step behind, eyes flicking over the narrow path lined with flowers and dense shrubs. Too many kinds for him to name. Some looked ornamental, others… less so.

He noted the variation warily, wondering if any of them were poisonous. He *really* wouldn’t be surprised.

The corridor opened into a courtyard, simple and sunlit. Hylla didn’t slow.

She marched straight to the inner door, knocked—*hard*—and shouted, “Abigail!”

Silence.

Luke stared at Hylla, who scowled like she’d been personally insulted. She took a breath, deep and dramatic, straightening like a general about to summon a lazy soldier from bed.

“*ABIGAIL!*”

There was a thump inside. Then a muffled string of furious muttering. Footsteps—no, not footsteps. Nothing as civilized as that. Marching. Each step landing like it meant to crack the floor open.

Luke’s heart did a somersault, suddenly slamming hard in his chest.

He was about to see Abigail again—

The door burst open with a bang, slamming against the wall like a declaration of war.

“What do you want, you little shit?” the woman barked, scowl already in place.

Luke froze.

The voice was new—older, rougher, less shrill than he remembered. Not the voice that used to scream at him about being Dad’s favorite, or about why *he* got the dog and she didn’t. Not the voice that dragged him into corners with her tarot deck like she really knew how to see the future. But the eyes weren’t: blue-violet, sharp as ever. Same dark brown hair, shorter now, pulled half-up, held in place by a braid that looped toward the back of her head.

“I’m not deaf,” she snapped, glaring at Hylla. “And I’m *definitely* not one of your wide-eyed newbie brats you get to summon like a maid.”

Hylla scoffed. “Yeah, clearly.” Her voice folded a little—more defensive now, like being confronted with peak Abigail had knocked some wind out of her. She added, muttering, “You’re the one who does that anyway.”

“What was that?” Abigail said, slow and dangerous, eyes narrowing.

Hylla didn’t answer. Just pivoted.

“This is Lúcia,” she said quickly, gesturing to Luke like she was handing off a live grenade. “She’s your new housemate. Mistress’ orders.”

Then, under her breath, quiet but audible, “Guess your solo era’s over. Sucks.”

Abigail opened her mouth, clearly ready to spit something back, but her eyes landed on Luke.

They swept over him—head to toe, slow. Her brow furrowed, mouth closing just as gradually. Her gaze paused, narrowed, and then—

A flicker. Her eyes widened. Just for a second.

Then she pulled herself back together with almost offensive speed, stepping forward until she stood directly in front of him. Same face. Same posture. And yes, Luke noted with mild irritation—she was still taller than him. And definitely tilting her chin up *on purpose*.

“I know her,” Abigail drawled. “This is my…” A twist of her mouth. “…*sister*.”

“Sister?!” Hylla echoed. Not a shout, exactly, but definitely not quiet.

Which—yeah. Fair. Luke got it. It *was* a bit shocking. Honestly, he’d half-expected Abigail to sell him out on the spot, just because she could. Or maybe just from the sheer shock of seeing him here, since she'd been hiding. Hiding *too* well. And she’d never been particularly fond of her brothers to begin with; back in the day, the only one she treated with anything resembling real respect was Aubrey.

So this? Her playing along?

Weirdly… a relief.

Luke smiled delicately.

Abigail made a dramatic vomiting noise.

He ignored it.

“Yes, she’s my older sister,” he said, tilting his head slightly, tapping his chin with one finger like he was genuinely pondering something.

He didn’t look at her, but he could feel the way she was glaring at him like he was something she stepped in.

“Maybe that’s why Mistress looked at me like that,” he mused, half to himself. “Makes sense.”

“Wait, wait, wait. Dial back.”

Hylla lifted both hands, like she was physically trying to stop the moment from rolling forward. Her eyes flicked from one of them to the other, searching for the resemblance in real time—

And Luke saw it. The exact second she found it, her face twisted like she'd just bitten into something sour.

“Sisters?” she repeated, like the word was her last tether to reality.

“Yes,” Abigail said, staring at her nails like the conversation was already beneath her, which might’ve been more convincing if her other hand wasn’t gripping his arm like a vice.

“Daughters of the Messenger God and all that,” she said, tone flat. “Demigods, same source. You know—back when our father went on one of his seeding rampages.”

She flicked her fingers in a lazy circle, the motion dismissive.

“Not that you’d know anything about that. I doubt you even know where babies come from.”

Hylla puffed up like a kettle about to boil, face red with righteous indignation. But she flicked a glance at Luke—quick, embarrassed—and he felt a flicker of sympathy. Abigail was being *too* rude. Well, she was *always* like that, but still. It wouldn’t kill her to be civil. She was older than him too. Twenty-four, maybe, if he was remembering right. Definitely old enough to cut the mulish nonsense.

“I *do* know!” Hylla growled, red as a tomato. “*We all do!* That’s why Mistress makes the men transform! So they don’t… you know, have… impure thoughts. Like, wanting to—”

She trailed off, face somehow getting redder as she searched for the right word.

Abigail cut her off, smirking like a cat with blood on its mouth. “You can’t even say it.”

Then, slow and theatrical: “*Sex.* Sex with us.”

Hylla shrieked.

Luke didn’t move. He stood exactly where he was, blinking between them like he was watching a particularly loud stage play.

*Didn’t she become an Amazon queen?* he thought, squinting slightly. *And didn’t they actually… like men? At least sometimes?*

Maybe she’d grow out of this. He tilted his head, eyeing her like she was a half-finished puzzle. Abigail noticed, of course, and huffed.

“And you, *Lúcia*,” she dragged the name out like it had thorns in it, “are you still being called Saint back at Camp?”

“Saint?” Hylla echoed, eyes snapping toward him.

*Ah,* Luke thought. *Now she’s attacking me. For free.*

“…Let me go inside already, Abigail,” he said instead, voice flat, expression unmoved except for a twitch at the corner of his mouth. And fingers. Maybe his soul.

“So yes,” Abigail said, ignoring him entirely. She stepped aside just enough to let him through. “Still a lil virgin. Figures.”

“That makes her perfect for this place!” Hylla blurted, valiantly trying to defend him. Clumsily. Painfully.

Abigail laughed—loud, sudden, and so mocking Luke wanted to slap her just to make it stop. *Jesus.* He already regretted finding her.

“Yeah yeah, very fitting,” she said, waving a hand like she was done with all of them. “Now go babysit your little mini-me. She was bothering me while I was reading sheep guts and nearly puked on me. That brat.”

Whatever Hylla said in response, Luke didn’t catch—Abigail slammed the door before the sentence was even finished, then crossed her arms and turned to him like he was something sticky tracked in from the mud.

“What the hell are you doing here, you idiot? Do you want to end up a pig like the rest of the dirty men on this island?”

*How rude.*

Luke tilted his chin just slightly and replied, with all the delicate primness he could summon, “I’ll have you know I’m practically a woman.”

Abigail stared. Blinked. Once. Twice. Then slowly dragged a hand down her face, like physically wiping the sentence from existence.

Luke, moved by a rare sense of mercy, decided to clarify. “Look, I already passed by the mistress of the island.” A pause. A pointed look. *Should’ve paid attention, moron.* “Like Hylla said, she sent me here. Probably figured out we’re siblings.”

“…You passed by the mistress?” Abigail echoed, eyes narrowing as she looked him up and down. “And you’re not a pig? Or some fluffy little animal she thought matched your vibe?”

She stared harder, like she could force the puzzle into place if she just glared long enough.

But Luke had already sobered, his face shifting—no more teasing, no more tilt of the chin. Just a quiet steadiness as he looked at her. All that same rudeness, just a little more grown, short-haired and sharp-edged now. Still his sister.

“Were you here this whole time?” he asked.

Softly, but it carried weight. Landed like a stone dropped into water, the echo rippling in the stillness.

He didn’t look away, just watched as her face emptied. Wiped clean, like a slate.

She stared back at him, same way.

For a beat, she said nothing.

Then—

“No,” she breathed, turning on her heel and walking deeper into the house.

Luke followed. She didn’t comment on it. Just kept moving—quick, efficient steps, same rhythm as his own. Fruit of the same tree.

“At first I popped around here and there. Traveled a bit. I didn’t know where to go, so I went nowhere. And everywhere.”

She glanced back at him, eyes glinting blue-violet in the light.

“I didn’t want to be found.”

Luke snorted, low and humorless. “Yeah, I figured that when Mr. D tried to track you and couldn’t. Which is kind of impressive, by the way.”

She turned a corner without looking at him, eyes ahead, but the edge of her mouth quirked briefly. “I’m good. What can I say—shadows are my calling.”

The smile fell just as quickly.

“I was… around,” she said. “Evaded monsters. Stole what I needed. Just wandered for a while. It was fine. I was left alone. Dad didn’t seem to care enough to drag me back, and Mr. D couldn’t find me—though he got close a few times.”

She shrugged.

“But I sank into the shadows before he could catch me.”

Luke didn’t say anything at first. Neither did she. The silence that followed wasn’t empty—it was thick, heavy with things neither of them had the language for anymore.

Then, quietly: “Mr. Asher still waits for you.”

She faltered. Just a breath, but it was enough.

Luke kept his gaze forward, voice steady but flat. “He lives near my grandmother. Sits out on his porch every day with a plate of food, watching the street. My grandma tries to get him to

come inside, but he never does. And when he does, it's never for long. He stays out there from morning to night."

He glanced at her, just once. Neutral. Controlled.

"Your father misses you, Abigail. Said you were his special girl."

Her eyes shut.

When she opened them again, her voice was cool. "Papa's always been naïve. That's how Dad managed to saddle him with me in the first place."

Then she turned, brisk and businesslike, walking faster.

Luke didn't follow.

"Did you really leave him?" he called. "No note? No goodbye?"

She didn't stop.

His voice climbed, rougher now. "Seven years, Abigail. Nothing. Not a single word to him." A beat. Quieter, but more cutting: "Not to me, either."

He stepped forward.

Then the rest tore out of him—too fast, too hard to hold back. "I thought you were dead!"

His voice cracked.

"*Dead,* Abigail!"

"*Shut up!*" she roared, spinning around, eyes blazing. "Shut up! You don't understand anything!"

"I understand more than enough," Luke hissed, not budging an inch. "I understand you ran because you didn't want to lose anyone else after Aubrey died—like I didn't feel it too. Like none of us did. You ran, Abigail. You *left*. You were too much of a coward to even try."

"Shut up," she said again, but it sounded thinner this time. Like a thread pulling tight.

Her hands fisted in the collar of his chiton, eyes wide, breath uneven.

"Shut up," she repeated, broken now. "You don't get it. You don't *get* what it's like to feel the cold seep in when no one else can. To see things in bones and clouds and broken birds, to know something's coming but never enough to stop it."

She shook her head once, violently.

"You don't know what it's like to be made of shadow and still not know where to go."

Luke didn't speak right away. He just looked at her—the wide, wild eyes, the sharpness of her breath, her whole body tight with panic and anger. His sister. Still running, even now.

"I know what it's like," he said at last, quiet and even.

She threw a look at him, sharp, defensive.

"I know what it's like to not be enough," he continued. "To try and change something and have it fall apart anyway. To think—maybe—your interference just made it worse. That it would've been better if you'd done nothing at all."

His gaze stayed on her, steady and unflinching.

"But sometimes… sometimes I still help. I still change something. Someone. Even if it's small. Even if it's not perfect. And I have to remind myself that it matters. That I *matter*."

Slowly, he lifted a hand and placed it over her wrists, still curled tight in his collar.

"And maybe you do too," he said softly. "Maybe you need to remind yourself."

He gave a gentle squeeze.

"You're not a shadow, Abigail. And you're not lost."

Luke looked into her eyes—blue-violet; blue, like his own—and held her gaze.

"You're Abigail Barker. Daughter of Mr. Asher. My sister. You *were* lost," he said, voice sure. "But now you've been found."

She looked at him for a long second. Her fingers twitched, then let go.

"Found," she echoed, quiet. She exhaled like she couldn't tell if that was supposed to be a joke or a comfort. Maybe it was both. Maybe neither. Luke doubted she knew.

"You found me, little brother," she said. "When I didn't want to be found."

"And now you're stuck with me," he said, giving her a small, tentative smile.

She returned it—awkward, a little lopsided, but there.

Still tender. Still fragile. But something had shifted. The air between them felt lighter. Like the worst of the storm had passed, like the explosion had cracked something open, not just apart.

Maybe it would always stay crooked between them.

But maybe that was fine.

Some things were meant to stay imperfect.

Some things were still beautiful anyway.

She sighed and started tidying her braids—like her hands needed something to do. She didn't look at him.

"Why are you here anyway? I figured it wasn't because you *knew* where I was. Dad said he wouldn't tell anyone."

*Dad did?*

Something sour rose fast in Luke's chest—rabbit-quick, like his body was already preparing to bolt, even as anger threaded through him like a snare.

Still, he kept his voice level. "I'm on a quest for the Golden Fleece. I ended up on an island, and the resident Titan kicked me off like I was some cursed hot potato—just tossed me across the sea, and I landed here. Then a dove showed up, made me wear this—" he gestured vaguely at the chiton—"and I somehow infiltrated."

He exhaled. "But I need to find the others before something bad happens to the brats. So if you could help me, I'd appreciate it."

Then his voice sharpened. "And what do you mean Dad *said* he wouldn't tell anyone?"

Abigail stared at him like he'd just recited a prophecy backwards. Her brow furrowed, mouth a little open, as if trying to reassemble the words in order.

"…Come again?"

"I need your help," Luke repeated, slower this time.

"No, *moron,*" Abigail snapped, waving her hands. "The whole *Titan-dove-Golden-Fleece* situation. Don't just drop mythic nonsense on me like it's normal. Context, please?"

Luke crossed his arms. "Then explain what you meant about Dad."

She twisted her mouth. They stared each other down.

She blinked first.

Luke won.

Abigail huffed, "Fine. Stubborn brat. Why do I even bother…"

She rolled her shoulders, like bracing for a rant.

"Dad found me once—when I was trying to sneak through the Underworld. Apparently, that's not allowed. You're only supposed to see the sights if you're one of the Host of Many's kids. Which, you know, isn't really a thing anymore."

She shrugged. "So I got hunted."

A beat.

She waved a hand, like brushing it off.

"Anyway, Dad appeared. Shooed them away. Told me I was such a good little shadow walker. Then he got weird—said something was *after me*, all serious. It was kind of terrifying."

Luke said nothing, but his jaw ticked.

Abigail kept going, "And then, of course, his mood flipped like it always does, and he got all conspiratorial. Said there was a place I could learn more about… this."

She opened her palm. In it were a few small stones, faintly glowing, shifting slightly against her skin.

She looked at him like it should be obvious.

Luke blinked. "I see…?"

"Fortune-telling by stones," she huffed, rolling her eyes. "You know. Like that weird thing the Bright One gave him forever ago? Yeah. It's a *thing*."

It wasn't a thing, at least not to Luke. But he kept that to himself.

"Anyway," she finished, "he told me to stay here for a while. Said it was safe. That I'd learn what I needed. And that he wouldn't tell anyone where I was. Swore it on the Styx, too. Serious stuff."

Luke narrowed his eyes. That… sounded off.

"Someone after you?" he asked, mind already working to piece things together. "Mr. D?"

"I don't think so," Abigail said with a shrug. Like it didn't matter. Like she hadn't just said something that sounded like a warning. "If it was, Dad didn't say. He kept smiling like it was all part of a big cosmic joke. Real vague. Real weird."

She shook her head, braid swinging over her shoulder. "Anyway. Your turn."

"But—"

"Your *turn,* Luke."

He sighed, rolled his eyes. Fine. He'd come back to that. Later.

Drawing in a breath, he let his shoulders settle. His tone changed.

"Camp's in trouble," he said. "The borders were poisoned. The protections we had—they're weak now. The Stymphalian birds made it through."

That hit. He saw it in her eyes, the way she stilled.

“People died,” Luke continued, voice flat. “One of our siblings. I don’t know if you remember him—Connor. You left the day he showed up. He… he’s not doing well. And two unclaimed kids didn’t make it.”

He didn’t look at her. Couldn’t.

“We had a war council. The Golden Fleece came up. Percy—new kid, son of the Lord of the Sea—had a dream about where it might be. I got picked for the quest.”

He hesitated, then added, “But we didn’t get far. Scylla wrecked our ship. I got separated. Ended up on Thrinacia.”

Abigail’s lips parted slightly, like she wanted to interrupt—but didn’t.

“The Radiant let me go,” Luke said. “Kicked me out like I was some bug he didn’t want buzzing near his turf. I washed up here. And then a dove appeared. Dressed me. Led me in. And then vanished.”

He looked at her now. Fully.

“And you know what a dove means.”

Abigail was quiet for a long moment.

Then she muttered, “Damn.”

“Yeah,” Luke said, voice low. “Exactly.”

Abigail looked at him like there were a thousand things she wanted to say—but instead, she just shook her head, sighed, and chose the path of least emotional resistance.

“Well, *sister,* if you’re staying, you might as well buckle up and listen.” She crossed her arms, chin lifting like a commander addressing her troops. “Big sis is going to teach you how this island works. What to expect from classes, what the Mistress likes, what not to say unless you want to get hexed.”

She tossed her braid over her shoulder, glancing out the window. The light was golden, slanting but not yet fading.

“Since she accepted you, that means you’re expected to participate. Maybe even—gods forbid—*try.* She has a thing for effort. Especially when it involves magic.”

Luke stared. “Wait. Now?”

“Now,” Abigail said, already moving. “You’re accompanying me to class.”

“What about a tour? An orientation? Time to adjust before I’m thrown to the wolves?”

Abigail snorted. “Welcome to the island of the Witch, *sister*. Let’s hope you’ve got some talent. You’re related to me, so maybe you won’t be completely useless. Just imitate me.”

*Imitate you,* Luke thought, following as she swept out of the house and back onto the marble path like a queen leading a very reluctant subject. *Sure. That's easy.*

They hadn't gone far when Abigail lifted her voice—still dry, but almost polite. "Jade."

Luke glanced up as a tall woman approached. Pale, long-limbed, with black hair braided through with beads that shimmered like starlight. Her green eyes were cool and steady, and she moved like someone who'd spent years in quiet conversation with the moon.

"Abigail," she said in return—calm, unhurried. Her gaze flicked to Luke once, assessing. Serene.

"This is my sister, Lúcia," Abigail sighed, dragging a hand through her hair. "She showed up today. Now I'm stuck showing her around."

Jade nodded, voice still soft. "I'm sure she'll do just fine."

*Sure*, Luke thought. *I'll do just fine. No pressure.*

He followed a step behind as the two women moved ahead—Abigail grumbling like she'd been personally wronged, Jade gliding beside her with the kind of grace that seemed otherworldly.

Luke kept quiet. Still catching up. Still trying to make sense of how he'd gone from a shipwreck to this: magic lessons, wolves, and witches in marble courtyards.

Beasts roamed around them, lounging in the sun or weaving between hedges. A few crept too close.

Abigail scowled and waved them off. Jade gave her a silent look of disapproval every time.

"What?" Abigail muttered. "They've got fleas."

"They want affection," Jade replied gently. "They won't bite."

"They want snacks," Abigail retorted, scanning the trail ahead. "Or blood."

Then she pointed. "And that one *does* bite."

Luke followed her gaze—and froze.

The caramel-colored wolf.

Massive. Silent. Planted in the center of the path like a statue carved from muscle and fang. He didn't move, didn't twitch—just stared, unblinking, like he was waiting for something.

They all stopped.

"…This is unusual," Jade murmured.

“No kidding,” Abigail muttered. “He’s never just sitting there. And when he *is* around, he’s snarling and throwing his weight around like some rabid beast trying to infect the air.”

She gave him a look like she might hex him on principle.

“Don’t be cruel,” Jade said quietly, taking a careful step forward.

The wolf responded instantly—lips curling back, teeth flashing in a silent warning.

Jade halted. “Still the same then.”

“Let’s not push our luck,” Abigail muttered, already turning. “Come on. We’ve got class.”

Jade gave the wolf one last lingering look before turning to follow Abigail down the path. Luke lingered a moment longer, then moved after them, casting a final glance over his shoulder.

The wolf hadn’t moved. Its gaze was still fixed—on him, Luke realized. Not on them as a group, not on Jade or Abigail. Just him.

Then it rose. No growl, no warning. Just a slow motion as it stood and began to follow. Quiet. Deliberate.

Abigail glanced back, catching the movement.

“That thing is following us,” she muttered, a thread of annoyance in her voice.

Jade turned too, her brow knitting slightly.

“…At least it’s not attacking,” she said after a beat. “Let it.”

“I hope it doesn’t go crazy in class,” Abigail muttered, her tone making it very clear she *wanted* exactly that.

Jade said something in response—soft, but sharp, the kind of hissed reprimand only someone used to dealing with Abigail could deliver.

Abigail rolled her eyes and kept walking.

Luke glanced back.

The wolf was still watching him. Still following. Its tongue lolled out slightly, ears perked like it was paying close attention.

Not to them. To *him.*

Its eyes were gray.

Chapter End Notes

Sooo. Abigail. As much Abigail as I could possibly make her—aka still a brat (she's three years older than Luke) even as a full-grown adult woman. She's just been vibing around the world, dealing with her issues, evading Mr. D like a ninja, and stealing things like the good little Hermes kid she is. Honestly, kind of OP when you think about it. Girl's got skills. Shadow-walking, psychopomp stuff, and now fortune-telling with stones—which is actually a legit Hermes thing. He can do divination with pebbles.

Also, yes, Hermes knew where she was the whole time. And all that weird, cryptic, vaguely ominous stuff he said to her has a reason. Hermes being Hermes. But Luke is the one stuck dealing with the full unhinged version of his dad. Poor Luke, lol.

Anyway, I was gonna get to the magic lessons in this chapter—really—but then Luke and Abigail had a moment and it derailed the whole thing. So. Next chapter, I swear. Magic stuff incoming. Also, the wolf returns. And yes, Luke will be doing some vague dog-language decoding slash detective work. You'll see.

Thank you so much for the comments!! I read and adore every one, I promise—I just got destroyed by uni and now I'm staring down a comment mountain like 👀. I'll get through it. Slowly.

Soo, why did Hermes make that Styx oath?

# Chapter 63: SoM - Threshold

Chapter Summary

> Luke goes to the magic lesson, meets a very vain instructor, and somehow manages to poof himself out of existence for all of five seconds. Oh, and apparently… he can speak doggy language too.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

> "And try *not* to embarrass me during this lesson, please. Gods, it's not that hard—just feel the energy, don't do anything stupid, and for the love of all that's holy, if you mess this up I swear—"
>
> Abigail kept going, and Luke listened with half an ear. It really wasn't worth feeding the fire once she got like this.
>
> Some things didn't change—not in seven years, not ever. Same stubborn streak, same grumbling pride, same half-grown tantrums in a grown woman's body.
>
> And God forbid he said that out loud.
>
> If this was bad, then the explosion he'd get for even daring to voice a complaint would be catastrophic. Biblical, even.
>
> Still, Luke's mouth twitched. The need to say something clawed at him, quiet and persistent, like a toothache in his willpower. He was actually weighing the pros and cons of testing Abigail's alleged—read: probably fictional—maturity.
>
> It really was quite simple. And true.
>
> What he was dying to say in response to her unwanted advice and even more unwanted lecturing was: *I'm just a beginner, lady. If watching a beginner be a beginner embarrasses you, maybe that's a you problem, huh?*
>
> But Luke kept his mouth shut. Just walked. Followed his sister and her mysterious companion—he shot a glance at the quiet woman at Abigail's side, serene and detached, like she was only half-present on this plane of existence.
>
> Which, honestly? Luke respected. If tuning out Abigail counted as a superpower, he wanted it.

“Are you listening, *Lúcia*?” the devil herself said, snapping her fingers in front of his face like she hadn’t just been monologuing at full volume for the last five minutes.

Rude.

“I hear you, *big sister,*” he said, drawling the title with all the practiced irritation of a younger sibling baiting a bear.

He bit back the rest. Smiled sweetly instead—too sweetly, the kind of smile that anyone who knew him would clock as fake—and gave her a look soaked in bratty, saccharine malice.

The full-body shudder she gave in response was almost worth it.

*Almost*.

“She’ll be fine,” Jade said smoothly, cutting in just before Abigail—whose face, Luke noted, was turning a very undignified shade of red—could start shouting and make a scene.

Which, frankly, would only end up making her look ridiculous. Not him.

Who’s the immature one again?

Abigail squinted at him, tight-lipped.

Luke recognized that look instantly—older sisters everywhere had patented it: *This isn’t over, you brat.*

He snorted. Folded his hands in front of himself like a perfect little witch and kept walking, posture serene, chiton swishing like he’d trained it to. He did not look at her. He didn’t have to. The glare was practically sizzling against the back of his neck.

“So,” he said lightly, turning to Jade, “what’s this lesson actually about? Abigail didn’t bother with the details.”

Jade threw Abigail a look—one that said she’d been through this too many times already—then sighed. “It’s just one of our internal sessions. The Mistress doesn’t supervise all of them. Sometimes the older girls take charge. Usually nymphs.”

She tilted her head as she walked, hair slipping down her shoulder in a glossy curtain. Like the night sky had gotten bored of being in the sky.

“It’s meant to be… communal,” she added. “A chance to bond. Share knowledge. Pass things down.”

Luke blinked. So it was the kind of thing where older students guided the newer ones—not officially, maybe, but with enough formality to pass as a lesson.

A way to build connection, reinforce whatever Circe wanted them to absorb beyond spells.

Thoughtful, in its own way. Just witch-style.

“And of course today’s mentor had to be her,” Abigail muttered, voice low and venomous. “Just my luck. Olenoe, of all people.”

She squinted ahead like she’d spotted a lifelong enemy—which, knowing Abigail, she probably had.

Luke followed her gaze, and startled.

Oh. They’d arrived.

Somewhere between Abigail’s dramatics and his own nerves, he’d missed the transition entirely. But now he was standing in the middle of a witch gathering.

A female-only witch gathering.

On Circe’s man-hating island.

Even with Circe’s personal approval, Luke couldn’t stop the tightening in his chest.

As if someone—anyone—might still look at him and know.

Which was ridiculous.

But Luke never claimed he was the most emotionally stable when thrown off balance.

He tried to focus on the setting instead. Tried to trick himself into calm: *serene as a still lake, I belong here, I’m passing, I’m fine, I’ll ace this stupid lesson.*

It worked.

Barely.

The space opened before him like an ancient Greek theater, softened with garden edges. Marble columns reached into the darkening sky, pale and gleaming, as the moon climbed higher—full, heavy, almost too bright. Like Selene herself had just blinked awake and decided to smile down on their little coven lesson.

The hedges were wild but obviously shaped, full of flowering vines and tangled growth, moon-touched and strangely elegant. Luke recognized the design—chaos that had been curated.

The grass beneath his sandals shimmered silver-blue.

Marble benches wrapped around the clearing. Most were already full—women and girls in layered chitons, draped in easy confidence. Their voices rose as they approached: gossip, laughter, the occasional shimmer of magic mid-gesture. Someone was braiding spellwork into another girl’s hair like it was casual.

Luke gulped.

At the center stood a woman. He recognized her as a nymph almost immediately—too symmetrical, too still. That polished, slightly unnatural shine to her hair and skin. A dryad? No, wrong tone. Naiad? Too dry.

Probably an oread—one of the mountain nymphs.

The slight gray tint to her skin seemed like decent enough evidence, at least based on what Luke had seen of Mercury's employees.

*Poor overworked nymphs,* he mused, recalling their perpetually stressed-out faces whenever Mercury dragged him to Opulentia.

(Though… they also always looked at him like they were witnessing a miracle for some reason…?)

He lifted a silent candle of sympathy in honor of their nonexistent downtime.

"Olenoe," Abigail spat, cutting into his thoughts like a slap. "She's hated me since the second we met. Didn't even try to hide it."

She scoffed, arms crossed, clearly preparing for combat.

"Fine by me. I hate her too. Pointy-nosed, high-altitude statue *bitch*."

"Abigail—" Jade warned, sharp, already at that too-close-to-snapping edge Luke guessed she usually saved for true emergencies.

The warning was just in time, because the nymph's head snapped in their direction like she'd heard every word Abigail said—across a crowded, moonlit amphitheater, no less.

Which, yeah, Luke thought, was pretty damn impressive. Maybe she did have better ears than most.

Did magic do that? Was that a nymph thing?

He squinted, brain scrambling through half-remembered Camp memories. The nymphs there had always known more than they should've. The gossip. The way they always knew who was sneaking off with who and which cabin was hiding cookies.

Yeah, he decided. They probably did have freakishly good hearing.

Olenoe raised one perfectly sculpted eyebrow in their direction, and Luke didn't need magic to feel the *personal* in it.

Abigail responded with a smile full of teeth—a slow, sharp baring like a beast already tasting blood and daring someone to tell her no.

"Abigail," the woman said, voice like a smooth stone skipping across water—graceful, rhythmic, but there was weight underneath. An edge.

“How lovely. I see you’ve chosen to grace us with your presence after all.”

The way she said it made Luke flinch on instinct.

*Grace* sounded a lot like *taint* in her mouth.

Olenoe tilted her head just slightly, and smiled—not with teeth, but with something Luke immediately disliked more.

A flicker at the corner of her lips, like a snake testing the air.

“What an *interesting* turn of events, isn’t it,” she continued, “to see a daughter of the Fleet-Footed One arrive so…”

She let the silence linger, just long enough to be insulting.

“…*delayed*.”

Abigail went red in an instant.

“You—”

“And,” Olenoe interrupted, her nose wrinkling with faint disgust as her gaze landed on the wolf silently padding a few meters behind them, “I see you’ve brought a pet. As… questionable as that choice is. This one is…”

She trailed off, squinting at the wolf like she was searching for the perfect adjective—backhanded, carrying the exact dose of cutting to make a point—to crown him with.

“…a disturbed little thing,” she finally settled on.

“He will not be an inconvenience to us,” Jade said, her voice as unbending as steel.

*She seems to be… unusually invested in defending him,* Luke thought. Which he honestly didn’t expect—certainly not from one of Circe’s students.

*Maybe not everyone here shares the same views as their mistress?*

He barely had time to let that hope spark—bright and hot as a newborn flame—before it was snuffed. Immediately. Mercilessly.

His mind circled back to how she’d spoken so condescendingly just a moment ago, so casually dismissive, like the wolf was just that: a wolf.

Not a man. Not a person draped with a conscience and a name, buried under all that fur.

But a *pet*. Something that could be “fixed” with the right amount of head pats.

*They want affection. They won’t bite.*

Dehumanizing.

Olenoe tilted her head—idle, casual—as she slid her eyes to Jade's serene, if now slightly tense, posture. She hummed, lips tilting up into a smile that made Luke think of a snake sunning itself on a rock.

Venomous. Nonchalant.

Too sure of itself to be disturbed.

"Hmm. And how did this beast-lover arrive at that particular conclusion?" Olenoe purred. "A miracle? Or perhaps a sudden… talent for beast-taming?"

She flicked her eyes to her nails—painted a bright, almost violent red, each as sharp as polished stone.

"Did she finally surrender to her—" a tilt of her tone, mean and sickly-sweet "—desires?"

"I dare you to say one more word, Olenoe," Abigail snapped, all sharp edges and zero hesitation, towering over the nymph like she could force silence though sheer intimidation alone.

Which yeah, Luke could see that. Could see it very well, in fact. His sister was tall—tall enough that she cast a shadow over Olenoe's more petite, delicate frame.

He'd place his bets on her just for that. (Family loyalty aside, of course. Luke was a fair, honest man, after all.)

But Olenoe didn't even blink.

She slid her gaze lazily from her nails, flicked her fingers in a little dismissive flourish, then caught Abigail's glare.

They locked eyes.

A beat passed.

Then—

"The lesson is about to start."

Olenoe didn't even give Abigail time to process it. She whipped around, her chiton sweeping out behind her with a little too much grace to be natural. Luke blinked, squinted—yeah.

Magic.

He was pretty sure the wind didn't just volunteer to make someone's outfit look more dramatic.

Or maybe it wasn't wind at all.

She clapped her hands—sharp, practiced, commanding—and the sound cut straight through whatever Abigail had been about to scream.

Probably something apopletic, furious, and loud enough to pierce his eardrums.

Luke glanced sideways. And yep. His sister looked furious, but not surprised. Which meant Olenoe had done this before. Probably more than once.

"Today," Olenoe began, addressing the now-standing group with the tone of someone who didn't need to raise her voice to hold authority, "we'll be revisiting the foundations."

The girls had already gathered in a circle around her, all having stood from the benches with the kind of ease that came from being very used to these kinds of lessons.

Or maybe just very—*extremely*—used to Olenoe.

As if on cue, her gaze drifted to Luke. And she smiled.

It wasn't unkind, exactly—but it was small, polite, and very much not warm. Her eyes narrowed slightly, flicking to Abigail, then back to him.

Luke held her stare for a moment, careful not to let anything show. *Great*. She'd probably put it together—him and Abigail. He just hoped her apparent loathing of his sister didn't come with a two-for-one special. He had nothing to do with whatever personal grudge was going on here.

"Since we have a new face among us," Olenoe continued, her voice smooth, "we'll be adjusting the pacing slightly."

Luke caught the backhanded edge in that word—*adjusting*—and something about the way she said it felt less like a welcome and more like a challenge.

But he said nothing.

He wasn't in the habit of entertaining catty exchanges if he could help it. A waste of time, in his well-informed opinion—one based on all the… painstakingly catalogued *behaviors* of Cabin Ten, neatly arranged and methodically organized in the *hyena ethology* corner of his brain.

Besides, Luke considered, glancing out of the corner of his eye, his sister seemed more than willing to take the challenged spot, like a warrior whose honor had just been called into question.

And maybe she *would* have, if Jade hadn't lifted one hand—dainty, even elegant, but iron-firm—and caught Abigail's arm like she was a Rottweiler she didn't trust around strangers.

Which, Luke admitted, ticked his respect for her up a bit. Just a little. Honest.

Like a shark scenting blood, Olenoe's eyes flicked to Jade's grip on Abigail. Slowly, she smiled—a sharp, Mean Girls-worthy curve of pettiness—before turning on her heels with a

dramatic *floosh*, gliding along the circle of girls surrounding her.

“Now,” she said, voice rising cleanly, like a professor in a lecture—just one that probably involved animal sacrifice and making witchy salt circles, or… something like that. “Can any of you delightful ladies tell me what are the most basic topics one must know when it comes to magic?”

Silence answered her.

Luke almost felt awkward—that particular breed of awkward a student feels when they look around and only manage to meet the same lost expression on everyone else’s face.

Which, of course, was exactly what was happening now.

“Anyone?” Olenoe asked, one eyebrow already rising. She swept her gaze around the shuffling wave of girls, each trying *very* hard to not meet her eyes.

Every single one of them was suddenly fascinated by the ground, like it had summoned a choir of cherubs—soft, round, red-cheeked; the whole package—right on cue.

A singing ballad of valiant baby angels, tasked with the—highly, extremely, unequivocally—important task of shielding them all from the horror of being the dreaded chosen one.

Luke would know. He was doing the exact same thing.

“No one?” she continued, sighing—that soft exhale of air that vibrated with disappointment. The raw, achingly, soul-deep kind.

The one that very clearly said: *Really? You think that’ll protect you? Pathetic little fools.*

“It appears I’ll have to do everything myself,” Olenoe added, with that long-suffering sigh that was just convincing enough—but Luke caught the glint in her eye, the faint, practiced lift of her chin.

She *liked* this.

Abigail scoffed softly, her fury barely leashed.

“Who does this marble peacock think she’s fooling?” she muttered, low and full of venom. “With that giant stick shoved so far up her ass I’m surprised she can still walk.”

Jade’s fingers shot out, pinching Abigail’s arm—quick, sharp, hidden by the casual cross of her arms.

Abigail hissed under her breath, but Luke had already stopped listening, turning his attention back to Olenoe. She was circling now, slower, chin tilted up, hands clasped behind her back—the very picture of a professor on her rounds.

“Magic,” Olenoe began, with the self-satisfied air of someone imparting great wisdom, “as we all know—” Her gaze flicked to Luke, narrowing briefly, as if just remembering he

existed, before she cleared her throat delicately. "—or most of us, anyway… is an alignment of mind and will. The mind sketches the shape. Will makes it real."

Her eyes gleamed. She really did seem to enjoy this—magic, performing, showing off. Or at least, that was the vibe Luke was getting.

"We are the ones who see past the illusions, who grasp what lies beneath. Better yet," she lowered her voice, lifting one finger, as if about to share a sacred secret, "we shape it."

Someone from the crowd—a girl with freckles dusted faintly across her nose—raised her hand. Tentatively. *Very* tentatively. Like she thought it might be a red flag waved at a bull, if that bull just so happened to be a petite, chiton-wearing, smug nymph with a taste for humiliation.

Yeah. Luke couldn't blame her.

Olenoe glanced over, paused for a breath—just long enough to make it clear that being interrupted was a tremendous inconvenience—before smoothing it over with a polite, almost syrupy smile.

"Yes?" she said, sweet, controlled. "What is it?"

The girl faltered, shrinking a little under Olenoe's stare, but then gathered herself, inhaled.

"Is… the glamour charm an example of that?" she asked, voice thin but trying. "Of how—how we can shape other perceptions?"

Olenoe's smile shifted, just a little, into something almost genuine.

"Good question," she said, clasping her hands neatly. "It might be a basic spell—the kind we all learn first—but it's chosen *precisely* for that reason."

She swept her gaze slowly around the circle, letting it pass deliberately over each girl like she was measuring something only she could see, then added—

"Tell me…" she lowered her voice, voice pitched just right to make them all lean in, "what do you see… when you look at me?"

"A smug bastard who likes the sound of her own voice a little too much," Abigail muttered beside Luke—a little too loud, if the startled looks from the other girls circling them were anything to go by.

Luke felt his nerves jolt like they'd been wired straight to a live current, forced to dance on command. Jesus. He couldn't help it. Was Abigail really trying to start a fight?

Olenoe's eyes instantly cut in their direction, but beyond that, she didn't react. Just let out a soft, purposeful exhale and tilted her chin up, nose in the air, carrying on like Abigail's voice was little more than the buzz of a fly.

“Anyone has…” she paused—just long enough to make it very clear that she hadn’t appreciated the comment, even if she was pretending she hadn’t heard it. “…something to add? A volunteer? It’s part of the lesson.”

Another beat, then with a sugar-slicked smile:

“And I *won’t* take it seriously.”

Luke absolutely thought she’d take it seriously.

And, judging by the way no one so much as breathed too loud, that was an opinion everyone else seemed to share.

Until one brave soul made a leap of faith.

Or just threw herself on the altar.

Hard to say.

“A… nymph?” someone asked, voice small, uncertain, like they were afraid even that might be the wrong answer.

Olenoe tilted her head, narrowed her eyes just slightly, as if expecting something more, something better—but when nothing else came, she wrinkled her nose delicately and let out the softest huff. Then, all ease, all grace, she smiled.

“Yes,” she said lightly, almost bored. “Let’s go with that.”

She raised her hand, snapped her fingers.

Luke immediately narrowed his eyes, catching the faintest shift—the Mist, curling around her like it knew its role, sliding into place and settling along her skin like it belonged there.

Subtle. So subtle.

Luke glanced at the others, then at Abigail. No one else reacted.

*Huh*.

You’d think that, here—witches in training, a coven in the making or whatever—they’d notice.

But apparently not.

Or maybe it was his grandmother’s bloodline, some Castellan thing, like those Naruto clan powers, passed down by lineage. Exclusive, like the last limited-edition DNA of the ninja world, but in the demigod universe. Only this time, passed down through mortal bloodlines instead of gods—*for once*—to the special ones with the perfect pedigree.

The thought made him feel weirdly special for all of two seconds. Until he remembered that, historically, he wasn't great at seeing through the Mist.

Or—well—*hadn't* been.

Lately, he was seeing more.

That was… probably good. Maybe. He wasn't sure.

Maybe this place would explain that. Or at least give him something.

He watched Olenoe's skin shift, the faint gray undertones fading until she almost looked human. Almost.

If he couldn't see the curl of the Mist still clinging to her, he might've believed it.

"And now…" Olenoe's voice smoothed out, touched by something that sounded almost like genuine excitement. "What do you see?"

"You've made yourself look… human-like," Jade spoke first, her tone exact, carrying just enough of an edge to make Luke realize she hadn't forgiven Olenoe for her earlier dig. Not even close.

"A basic glamour spell only works if the caster's will aligns with it. You have to visualize the form clearly, or it falls apart."

She let her hair slip over her shoulder, dark as the night sky, the movement practiced but effortless.

"Which is why you went for the easy shift—skin tone. Anything more complicated would've clashed with your sense of self." A pause. "Your image, so to say."

Olenoe's eyebrows shot up so high they nearly vanished into her hairline.

Then she tutted, something like amusement flickering across her face—but there was also that faint, telling tilt to her lips, a slight crease at her brow that showed just how much Jade's words had *bothered* her.

It was a subtextual insult—one that said Olenoe was either too vain or too insecure to risk a more complicated transformation.

Luke wasn't sure which yet. He was still working that part out.

Maybe she couldn't. Or maybe she wouldn't. Either way, it didn't really matter.

What did matter was Olenoe's decision to let it pass—for now—moving smoothly on with the lesson like it hadn't touched her at all.

Though Luke was fairly certain she'd retaliate later.

The question wasn't *if*.

It was *when*.

"Indeed," Olenoe said, tilting her head—and with it, the Mist peeled away from her, the pink sliding off like bad paint in water, until her skin looked freshly rinsed, bare and breathing again.

"Glamours hinge on a strong sense of self-image," she went on, her voice smoothing out into lecture mode. "But will—that's what makes it move. That sacred alignment is what makes the impossible real."

She clapped her hands once, looked over all the girls, and spoke with a smile—though she did send Jade a quick, scattering glance.

But nothing more than that, thankfully.

Then, all silky authority, she said, "Let's begin. Divide into groups and attempt it. Chant the correct forms if necessary. And most important—"

She raised one perfectly manicured finger, pointing upward like she was delivering a sacred truth.

"Feel the energy. The Mist. It's the foundation of everything we do here. Recognize it. Keep in harmony with it… or you'll get nowhere."

*That sounds like witchy Buddhist nonsense,* Luke thought, squinting.

He didn't really buy it—but, well, he'd seen Olenoe's skin change so obviously that something had happened.

So maybe he was wrong.

Still. Hard to wrap his head around.

It's almost like they're saying: *Go dance with the Mist like it's some sentient thing*.

"Lu—Lúcia," Abigail cut in, her voice impatient, like she'd already been waiting too long. "Come on. You're with me and Jade."

Jade gave Abigail a look, and then, in a tone smooth as glass, added, "If you have questions, ask. I'll be guiding you."

Luke caught the subtext clear as day: *you're going to need it.*

He sighed, already resigned to what was going to be a stressful—probably exhausting—lesson.

But he didn't really have a choice.

And… it was magic.

*Kind of exciting*, he admitted to himself.

Abigail didn't wait. The Mist rose up around her like it belonged to her—no, like it had been waiting for her all along. Luke squinted as the changes settled in. Not dramatic, not cinematic. Just enough to make him feel like he wasn't quite looking at his sister anymore.

Someone with long blonde hair. The wrong skin tone. But the eyes—the eyes and that *I-will-kill-all-of-you* aura—yeah, those stayed.

And *that*, Luke thought, dry as ever, couldn't be glamoured away.

"See?" Abigail said, all casual dismissal, tossing her head as the blonde fell away and her hair snapped back to its usual length—like she was shaking off water, or illusions, or both. "Not hard. Your turn."

"Abigail," Jade sighed, heavy with the kind of exhaustion that sounded permanent.

But then Abigail turned, sharp and confused already, her whole posture screaming *what?* like she was daring Jade to keep going.

So Jade didn't bother.

She just looked at Luke, voice smoothing out. "If you prefer, you can chant the forms. But it's more important that you visualize it. Strongly. The image has to be clear. And—" she lifted a hand, like that said it better "—you have to want it. Really want it. Until the world moves."

"Want it?" Luke repeated, before he could stop himself, frowning.

If wanting was all it took, then he'd have willed himself a normal life a long time ago. One where he wasn't standing here, in this mess, trying to charm a semi-sentient atmospheric illusion into obedience.

But that's not how this worked, apparently.

"Yes," Jade said simply, then gestured for him to try it, like it was easy.

Luke glanced at her—serene, expressionless—then at his sister, already scowling like she regretted even being here. Then at the wolf, who had crept in closer, sitting just far enough away to not be a threat, but close enough to keep all of them in his line of sight. Near the entrance. Closer to the bushes.

No way out.

So he closed his eyes. Tried to make the will thing work—which was... difficult. How did you will something like this? Jade said visualize it. Want it. Really bad. Which sounded a little like Axel's whole spiel on dreams, from all that time ago.

Maybe it wasn't that different?

He'd been bad at the dream stuff, though. So maybe he'd be bad at this too.

But he had to at least attempt it. Or pretend, at minimum, to show that he was trying.

So. Visualize. Something simple. Olenoe had changed her skin tone, right? Maybe hair color? Simple enough. And once, in the *before*, he'd had black hair, so... not that foreign. Wouldn't clash too much with how he saw himself, or at least that's what he told himself.

*I hope this works,* he thought, then tried to make it true. Tried to feel the Mist.

It was slippery, but not hiding—especially not here, on this island, where it felt like it was seeping out of the ground itself.

*Come on*, he bit his lip, trying to guide it, clumsy, and it resisted.

It felt... not unlike his boundary powers, but infinitely more difficult. His own power was internal, easy to maneuver—well, not *easy*, but familiar. This, though. This was outside. Not his.

It resisted. Not violently. Almost gently, if he had to call it something. Like it was trying to tell him he needed to do something first. That it couldn't accept him like this.

*God, I just want to go home.* His jaw clenched. *Why can't my life be easy for once?*

The thought cracked something open.

Frustration spiked—and his mind just latched on. Like it had to solve this. Now.

And then it *did*.

The Mist glided to him—fast, but it didn't feel fast. More like it was settling. Circling. Until it felt like he was standing inside something soft and formless. Like stepping into a dream, mid-breath.

He heard it before he saw it.

"What the hell?" Abigail's voice, sharp. Too close.

He opened his eyes.

She was leaning in, eyes narrowed—but unfocused. They kept sliding, like they couldn't quite land. Like they were looking for him, but couldn't find where he was.

Then he realized: they couldn't.

Slowly, Abigail lifted a hand, blindly searching until it found its mark—his arm—then held it. Firm. Unmoving.

And—like that small gesture was all it took to remind the world it didn't need to move for one pretty boy—the Mist slipped off him. Sliding from his skin like it was saying goodbye. Crackling, trembling. Then soft again. Still. Like a cloud frozen in the sky.

"What did you do?" Abigail asked, eyes flicking over his face, then down at the arm she was still holding. She squeezed—quick, hard—like she needed proof he was actually here.

"I did what was asked of me," Luke said. Flat. But he frowned, just a little. Because yeah—he didn't really know what he'd done either. And Abigail was looking at him like he'd just committed a sacrilege.

"Maybe it's like you," Jade said, popping in, shrugging. "Shadow travel. Or something close."

"I doubt it," Abigail huffed, but she let go of his arm. Slowly. Like she half-expected him to just… poof out.

But Luke didn't.

He was still there. Flesh and bone. Still wondering what the hell just happened. And what the Mist had actually done when all he wanted was to change his hair color.

"Well… you did *something*," Abigail muttered, still looking at him like she couldn't quite puzzle it out. Or like she could smell something wrong, but couldn't place it. Either way, she shook her head, sharp, like a dog shaking something off, and scoffed. "Just—go stand there and keep an eye on the mutt. Make sure it doesn't attack some poor girl, or I'll have to euthanize it."

"Abigail—" Jade started, tone already tired.

But Luke didn't wait. His legs moved before his mind caught up, still looping around the only question that mattered: *What the hell. Did I just… disappear? Do I have invisible powers now?*

Great. But also not. Another thing thrown at him, like he didn't already have enough.

He sighed, glanced at the wolf.

The wolf stared back, tilted his head, then stood up. And he was *big*. Luke blinked. Big enough that his head hit Luke's chest. Would be taller than him, easy, on his back legs.

He chuffed low in his throat. Then shoved his nose into Luke's stomach. Sniffed.

Luke froze.

His mind ran straight to everything they'd said about this wolf. How wild he was. How he had almost torn Jade's hand off.

But the wolf just tilted his head again, gray eyes steady on him.

And Luke thought… he didn't seem all that wild. Considering Luke was still fully not-maimed. So. That was something.

Then the wolf moved in. Stepped even closer. Nudged his thigh with his nose—quick, firm—then circled him once, slow, paws scraping softly over the ground. He stopped just in front of him, exhaled sharply through his nose.

Like he was signaling something.

Which was ridiculous. Luke didn't speak dog. Or wolf. Or whatever this thing was.

But—

*Familiar.*

*Pack.*

*I know you.*

*Long ago. Camp. Rival. Friend. Always a challenge.*

The pieces came in like static, messy but there. Not words exactly. Just—impressions. Pressure. Meaning, shoving into his head like the wolf's nose had shoved into his stomach.

Luke stared at the wolf, and it felt like his mind was slipping. Like his life had just been tipped sideways and everything inside was spilling out, fast and stupid and unstoppable.

Because—

"Ryan?"

Chapter End Notes

So… Ryan is alive!!!

And the Mist thing is finally starting to become relevant—plus, there's that little hint with Luke managing to poof out of existence. Wonder what you guys will theorize about. 👀

Anyway, thank you so much for reading! I read and appreciate every single comment.

# Chapter 64: SoM - Recognition

Chapter Summary

> Abigail knows some things—and doesn't know a lot of others. Luke digs for answers, but what he learns only raises more questions. Then Clarisse arrives, and one thing is brutally clear: Percy was taken, and he's with Circe now.

Chapter Notes

> Updates will now be twice a month due to university—and to give me time to build a proper buffer of chapters (and reply to all your lovely comments, lol)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The moon was already halfway hidden behind the clouds when the lesson ended.

Not that Luke saw it—he'd been a little busy staring a hole through the wolf's head. Who was, apparently, Ryan. Who was also being surprisingly docile. Just sitting there. Like this was normal. Like Luke wasn't currently trying to shove his brain back into working order with both hands.

Ryan.

Here.

As a wolf.

It was a thought that kept circling inside his skull, tight and sharp, like a bird flying into the same closed window over and over again. It didn't make any more sense the longer he looked at it. Less, even.

*How?*

How had Ryan ended up here, and what in the nine flaming pits of hell had he been doing all these years to end up like—*this*?

And even worse—how was *Luke* understanding him? Ryan had been talking. Not with words exactly, but something like them. And Luke had… gotten it.

As far as he was concerned, he didn't speak wolf. Or dog.

Not like—*oh*.

The thought hit him like a brick to the head.

Percy. And fish.

He winced.

But there wasn't time to dwell on it—or pretend to dwell on it, as if he was anywhere near capable of that right now—because Abigail, as unceremoniously as possible, grabbed his arm and started dragging him back toward their so-called home.

Luke let her.

Too off-kilter to resist, really. He gave a half-hearted, "I can walk, you know," which was thoroughly ignored. Abigail had zero interest in his autonomy right now.

She was too busy narrowing her eyes at—

Yep.

Luke glanced over his shoulder too.

Ryan was following them. Trotting along like an obedient mutt, tongue lolling, ears perked.

He kept pace easily, even when Abigail muttered something that sounded dangerously close to "fleabag" and sped up—and Luke, still in tow, had no choice but to keep up.

It didn't help.

Ryan matched their every move—left when they went left, right when they went right, never straying more than a couple feet behind. Loyal. Persistent. Weirdly peaceful about it.

"Your mutt is following us," Abigail snorted, not bothering to hide her disdain as she shot a glare over her shoulder. "Great. Just what I needed tonight. Another headache to go with Olenoe's whole bitch-fest."

"Not my mutt," Luke shot back immediately. Then, in a scolding tone, "And don't call him that. He's a person. Even if he looks like a wolf. It's cruel."

Abigail rolled her eyes and let out a sharp breath through her nose. "Maybe. But how much of him is still left in that—" she nodded toward the wolf now padding quietly at Luke's side, massive and unnervingly quiet, "—fluffy, definitely not human, form?"

Luke hesitated.

A beat too long.

Dread curled cold fingers up his spine, but he recovered quickly. Quick enough, anyway.

No.

Couldn't be.

Ryan was… Ryan. The same guy who would rather die than let anyone forget he was the proud son of Athena. Who had opinions about everything and always made sure you heard them. The same guy who picked fights just to prove he was smarter.

And wasn't that still proof? That he hadn't changed? That the aggression—the constant snapping at everyone around here—meant something was still *in there*, beneath the fur and the teeth?

But how?

The question slammed around inside his head like a loose hinge. No answers came.

Luke didn't have the right information. Not yet. But—

He glanced sideways.

Abigail's mouth was tight, pursed the way it always was when she was annoyed. The same way it had been when she was twelve. Only now it was heavier, as if that same irritation had been weighed down by something invisible. Something he understood all too well now.

Maybe she *did* know something. She lived here, after all.

"And how can *you* be so sure?" he asked, breezy on purpose, letting his hand drift toward Ryan's head.

The wolf's gray eyes flicked toward him—just once.

No bared teeth. No growl. Just quiet acknowledgment.

Luke gave in to the impulse. He slid his hand into the thick scruff at Ryan's neck and—

Gods.

Softer than he expected.

Abigail glanced at the scene like she was witnessing something truly bizarre. Like an alien had just settled down in the middle of a sleepy suburb and no one else had noticed.

"…He's letting you pet him," Abigail said flatly, eyes flicking from Luke's hand—still buried in Ryan's fur—to the wolf's muzzle. There was a twitch in her fingers, small but unmistakable, like she was already bracing for Ryan to snap and tear a chunk out of Luke's arm.

But Ryan didn't move.

Didn't growl. Didn't bare his teeth. Just stared ahead like he hadn't noticed—or didn't care—that they were talking about him like he wasn't there.

Still, Luke remembered what Hylla had said. About Ryan biting someone. Jade, wasn't it? He was pretty sure it was Jade. Abigail's… friend, apparently.

"He's not a bad wolf," Luke said at last, voice carefully neutral. He glanced down at Ryan again.

Still calm. Still ignoring them. Still very much a wolf.

"That one's a crazy beast," Abigail huffed, eyes rolling so hard it was a miracle they didn't detach. She waved vaguely between Luke and the wolf. "This? This *never* happens. I don't trust it. Not for a second."

She narrowed her eyes at Ryan like she was daring him to so much as twitch wrong.

"Especially not near my house."

"Don't be so unkind to Riri, sister," Luke retorted, the nickname slipping out before his brain and mouth could coordinate and stop him. His fingers flexed, just slightly, in the thick scruff of Ryan's neck.

The wolf stilled.

Something shifted. Subtle. But it was there—the air tightening, quiet as a held breath. Ryan glanced up at him, then turned his gaze—slow, deliberate—toward Abigail.

Unblinking.

Abigail didn't flinch, but she went stone-faced. Still in that way only she could be. The Mist curled faintly around her like smoke, and the shadows under her feet—thicker now with night fully fallen—stretched long around her ankles, writhing gently, but never rising.

Luke watched. Noted it.

The silence between them stretched.

Then it snapped.

"Gods, you even *named* him," Abigail muttered, breaking eye contact first. She shifted her gaze from Ryan to Luke, her shoulders rolling back like she was trying to shake something off.

A forced stillness. Luke saw it immediately.

Beside him, Ryan seemed to settle too—his fur, Luke noticed belatedly, had been bristled. Now it lay flat again as the wolf slid his gaze forward, calm as ever. Like nothing had happened. Like a fight hadn't almost broken out.

*Great,* Luke thought. *At least a bloodbath didn't happen. If that's any consolation.*

But...

He chewed on the inside of his cheek. *I need to know more. I need information.*

"How did he end up here, anyway?" he asked, light as a breeze, as if it was just idle curiosity. And well, it *was*—but not only that. Something deeper gnawed beneath it. "You all act like he's some wild mad dog or something. He must've been around for a while to earn that reputation."

"He's a menace," Abigail shot back, almost automatic. Then she dragged a hand over her face, fingers pressing hard into her skin. She glanced at his hand again—still in Ryan's fur—then up to his face.

Her eyes locked on his, sharp. Serious.

She was staring at his soul. Or close enough.

Luke didn't flinch. He wanted to, badly. But he wasn't *that* easy to read, no matter how deep she tried to look.

The silence stretched. Long enough that he started to think she wouldn't answer at all. That she was weighing something, measuring him, choosing silence—

"I don't know," she said finally. "He's been here longer than I have."

"*Longer?*" The word escaped too fast.

Abigail tilted her head, eyes narrowing a fraction more. Luke forced himself to smooth his expression, even though the slip had already happened.

"So that's why you think he's not a man anymore?" he said, recovering quickly. "Because he's been a wolf for years?"

It wasn't that he didn't trust Abigail.

Which—well. It *had* been years since he'd last seen her, and Luke was someone who kept his secrets close to his chest. All of them. Hiding things came as naturally to him as breathing.

But that wasn't the only reason.

They were still outside, after all. And there was no way he was about to announce, out loud, that he *knew* this man-turned-wolf.

Someone else might hear.

And Luke wasn't convinced those witchy people didn't have ways of listening in on things they weren't supposed to. Honestly, he'd bet on it. He sure as hell would.

Abigail studied him for a beat before finally offering an answer.

"Yeah. The longer they stay like that," she flicked a finger toward Ryan, "the more they seem to lose their marbles. The man part gets buried under all that beastly instinct."

She shrugged. Casual. Like she wasn't talking about a person's mind unraveling.

"Of course they're kept tame under the Mistress's influence. She wouldn't want wild things running loose around us—especially since they were supposedly turned into that to protect us from their manness or whatever. Which is exactly why this fleabag roaming around doesn't make sense to me."

"Maybe she wants variety?" Luke suggested, but even he didn't believe it.

Why would Circe—who'd gone to such lengths to keep her island man-free—keep *Ryan* around?

"Maybe," Abigail allowed, turning off the path and passing the low stone wall of their house.

The Greek number etched into the gate shimmered in the moonlight, strangely luminous. Strange enough that Luke felt a chill.

It looked like a magic symbol.

It looked like the glyphs woven into Circe's dress.

"I heard from one of the girls—one who's been here longer than me—that the mutt once tore a man apart." Her voice was even. "I don't know the details. But maybe the Mistress thought he'd be useful that way. He doesn't bother us, most of the time. As long as we leave him alone."

They reached the house. Abigail stopped just in front of the door. Luke hung back a few paces, Ryan settling beside him without a word.

Abigail glanced over her shoulder.

"It's like they say," she murmured, her hand resting on the door handle. "It's an ill wind that blows nobody any good."

A pause.

"But just so you know—" her voice dipped, even and final, "—even as weirdly well-behaved as he is now, the mutt will *not* enter."

Luke looked at Ryan, who clearly understood he was being dismissed. The wolf tilted his head just slightly, muzzle angled like he was looking down at Abigail.

Judgmental. And more than a little pompous.

And for a split second—quick as a blink—Luke saw him.

Not like this. Not fur and fangs and voiceless.

*Ryan*.

Young, proud, human. Standing where the wolf was now. Like the two versions had overlapped for just a moment and let something bleed through.

Luke blinked.

And Ryan was a wolf again.

“Fine,” he sighed, turning toward Ryan and lowering his voice. “You stay here. Don’t bite anyone. I’ll come back later and… figure something out.”

Ryan made a low canine noise—and then the words slipped into Luke’s mind like an uninvited guest stepping over a threshold.

*I’ll stay. Guard.*

Luke’s eye twitched.

“I don’t need guarding—”

“Are you seriously still whispering sweet nothings to the mutt?” Abigail’s voice sliced through, laced with annoyance. “I want to sleep, *sister*. And I’m not going to stand here while you say a tender goodbye to your fleabag. Drag it out, and I’ll lock both of you out.”

Luke rolled his eyes, still facing away from Abigail. He gave Ryan’s fur one last ruffle before turning, gliding toward the door with a restrained sort of elegance—though, fine, maybe there was a little drama thrown in too.

“No need, Abigail,” he retorted, pointedly mangling her name. “And if you *had* locked the door, I would’ve broken in and stolen all your blankets.”

He stepped up beside her and whipped his head to the side in a grand flourish—like he had long hair.

He did not.

But that wasn’t the point. The point was—

*That.*

Abigail’s whole face twitched. A vein on her forehead began to throb, and Luke watched it with mild fascination, like a scientist observing a volcano: *will it erupt now, or just rumble for a bit?*

She didn’t erupt.

Not yet.

“You’ll sleep in the next room,” she ground out, jaw tight. “Pick up your stuff and follow me.”

Still no comeback. Luke noted it with quiet amusement, smiling just enough for her to notice —and hate it.

She jabbed a finger between his eyes. “And stop smirking, you little—”

“The room, Abigail,” Luke cut in smoothly, already turning toward the living room where he’d dumped his bag earlier.

He picked it up, gave it a quick check. Everything still there. Untouched since before the lesson.

Good.

Behind him, Abigail let out a sound that hovered between a growl and an outraged roar, then spun on her heel and marched off—clearly deciding not to waste another word.

Luke rolled his eyes, slung the bag over his shoulder, and strolled after her—easily catching up.

She led him to a room that was bare, aside from the essentials: a bed—soft, he noted, the kind that seemed to invite you to lie down and forget the world—and a dresser with a mirror. Nothing grand. The inside looked like a slightly modernized ancient Greek home, white walls, clean lines, functional.

He took it in with a slow sweep of his eyes.

Behind him, Abigail said, “My room’s across the hall. Don’t bother me for anything and—”

She stopped. Like the rest of the sentence had jammed in her throat.

Luke turned to face her just as she ran a hand through her hair and sighed.

“Look, about that quest you said you're on—I’ll help you get out of here.”

She met his gaze. Face serious now. No biting tone, no irritation. Just… serious.

“The Mistress already accepted you. Probably thinks you’re like some of the girls around here—wrong body, right soul. But I don’t know how long that’ll last. Sooner or later, she’s going to start asking questions.”

Luke pressed his lips together. “She seemed pretty convinced.”

Abigail smiled, thin and brittle. “Would you bet on that?”

She exhaled sharply. “Look, the Mistress is brilliant at what she does. But she’s not infallible. Things slip past her. Sometimes.”

She paused again, searching his face.

“Decades ago, long before us—some of the old-timers here told me this story—a man got onto the island. Somehow. Blended in.”

Luke blinked. “A man? *Here?*”

“Yeah.” Abigail’s voice stayed even. “Don’t know how, but he did. And when the Mistress found out, she lost it. Dealt with him immediately. She was furious.”

That word landed like a stone in Luke’s stomach.

Furious.

That wasn’t something he wanted pointed in his direction.

“So we have to get me out before she starts to figure it out,” he muttered, more to himself than to her.

*Lord, I don’t want to become a pig.*

“Yep,” she said, dragging the *p*. “And it won’t be easy. The boats are always guarded—some of the girls rotate shifts. Something about not letting men sneak in, or whatever.”

She tapped a finger against her lip, thinking. “But maybe we could slip past. I’ve got shadow-travel. A few of the others can do it too, but I’m better—they wouldn’t be able to find us. I could probably cover both of us.”

“Or,” Luke countered, rubbing his jaw, already starting to pace, “we could just sneak in the classic way and save that for when we’re about to get caught. So you don’t burn through your energy right away.”

His fingers tugged absently at the strap of his bag, restless.

“How many girls usually guard it? Do you know when the patrols change? That’s the vulnerable window—we could use it.”

“Not many,” Abigail said, sure of herself. “Five, maybe? I’ll check. Jade would probably tell me without asking too many questions—she prefers not to know what I’m up to.”

She looked at him, face thoughtful now.

“I could probably get you out in a few days. But... there’s an easier option. Riskier, yeah—but easier.”

Luke shot her a glance, one brow raised. “Riskier than stealing a boat?”

“You could go to the Mistress,” she said, deadpan, “and ask to leave.”

Luke swallowed back a snort. “Yeah, no. That’s not an option.”

“I figured,” Abigail muttered, cracking her neck and rubbing the spot with one hand. “So stealing a boat it is. Honestly? Very on brand for us. Almost feels like Cabin Eleven again—just with fewer people.”

“A little sibling bonding over midnight theft,” Luke said, half a joke. “Very nostalgic.”

But his brows furrowed as Camp rose in his mind, and with it, Ryan.

Should he say it?

She was helping him. Risking something, even if she pretended otherwise. That should be enough to trust her. And he *wanted* to help Ryan, or at least try. Try to undo… whatever magic Ryan was under.

Still, the old instinct kicked in—*don’t tell, don’t tell, don’t tell*—like muscle memory, like the words were branded onto his ribs.

Luke swallowed against the lump in his throat. It lodged there like a warning.

“And…” he started, then trailed off.

Abigail raised one brow, waiting.

“There’s something. The wolf. I think…” He hesitated. “I think that’s Ryan. Do you remember him?”

Abigail blinked. Then her eyes widened.

“Ryan? That pompous little shit from Cabin Six? Arrogant bastard who even chewed like he thought he was better than us? *That* Ryan?”

Luke nodded once.

“Hah! Now he’s a floof ball,” Abigail snorted. “He’d probably be *furious* about it if he weren’t so far gone. Or maybe he *is* furious *and* insane—what a combo.”

Luke stiffened.

It wasn’t funny. It was cruel. Making light of Ryan’s situation like that—had the island already sunk its claws that deep into her?

But she was helping him. A man.

A man who happened to be her brother—and maybe *that* was the only reason.

Still, he didn’t let it slide.

“That’s not funny, Abigail. Don’t joke about it.” His voice was flat. Cold with disapproval. “Ryan might be a pompous jerk, but he doesn’t deserve *this*.”

She looked at him. At the tense set of his shoulders. Something shifted in her expression—guilt, maybe, or a flicker of something close—but it was gone as fast as it came.

"Turning him back would be harder than getting you out," she said—no apology offered.

Luke held her gaze for a moment, then turned away. He dumped his bag on the bed and started rifling through it, even though he already knew *The Odyssey* wasn't there. Annabeth had taken it.

"In the *Odyssey*, they managed to," he said quietly.

"Because Dad helped him," Abigail snapped, arms folding tight. "That's the only reason Mistress didn't turn him into a squealing pig like the rest."

She let out a sharp breath.

"You think we could pull that off now? Mistress isn't lenient. And I seriously doubt she'd take two demigods seriously without Dad breathing down her neck. It'd just make her start questioning things—and that includes *you.*"

Luke's jaw tightened. His hands moved faster, until they brushed something at the bottom of the bag—the gift Mercury had given him. He hadn't opened it. Not since that night.

He set it down on the bed. Slowly. Carefully. Fingers hesitating at the edge.

"But isn't there someone else?" he asked, voice low but steady. "You said there were older ones here. Nymphs. Maybe one of *them* would know something."

He looked up.

"The Lady of the Island is called *Pharmakeia*, after all."

"No," Abigail said, exhaling hard. "They wouldn't be willing to undo the transformation. And the younger ones? They don't even bother learning. Some of them don't even know how to turn men into animals in the first place—I don't."

Luke clicked his tongue and moved to open Mercury's gift when—

"What is that?" Abigail asked sharply, suddenly right beside him. She leaned over his shoulder, eyes narrowing.

"The chocolate is shimmering."

"A gift," Luke said, curt. He picked up the note wrapped around the jar—filled with milk chocolates, his favorite—and uncurled the paper.

*As Ulysses once crossed treacherous seas with divine aid, so too shall you, Lucas. Keep this close. Eat it when you face a foe greater than yourself. It will protect you.*

Luke let out a soft snort. *What a tick.* But there was no heat in it—just the ghost of a smile tugging at his mouth as he tucked the note back into the bag.

"Ulysses?" Abigail echoed, tone sharp. "Why the Roman name? And—" her gaze snapped to the jar, eyes narrowing again, "—who's helping you? That's not something people hand out. That reeks of magic."

"I told you already, it's a gift," Luke said, tilting the jar slowly in his hands. The chocolate inside shimmered faintly—divine, unmistakable—then dulled again, then shimmered once more. Like it was breathing.

*Maybe*, Luke thought, hope lifting behind his ribs, *maybe I can make Ryan eat it? Maybe it's like the candies from the books—*

His shoulders slumped.

*Or maybe it's not.*

And he couldn't afford to not consider that.

"A gift," Abigail echoed, unimpressed. Then she snapped the jar out of his hands with zero ceremony, eyes locking on his face. "Give me a straight answer. It was a god, obviously. But which one?" She squinted. "No Greek god uses Ulysses. And no one calls you Lucas, either."

Luke worked his jaw, mind scrambling for something that didn't sound like a confession. His skin prickled—too many possibilities, none of them safe.

"Well?" she pressed, already peeling the lid back, slow and deliberate under his stare.

"Give that back. It's mine," Luke snapped, lunging for the jar.

Abigail twisted away, blocking him with her body. And just like that, they were shoving, snapping at each other like they were little children again—her guarding the jar like it was sacred, him grabbing at it with the righteous fury of a wronged child.

"Tell me and I'll give it back," she taunted, palm flat against his face.

Luke licked it.

"Ugh—" Abigail recoiled, wiping her palm furiously on her chiton.

"It's a god," Luke said coolly. "You already guessed that much."

"I did," she agreed, still glaring. "Now which one? Because if you don't tell me—" she held the jar up like a threat, "—I'll eat every last piece of chocolate."

"You wouldn't dare."

"Try me."

Painstakingly—*deliberately*—Abigail's fingers dipped into the jar.

Luke watched, hawk-eyed, as she slowly curled her hand around a single piece of chocolate. Her movements were theatrical, taunting. She didn't break eye contact as she lifted it inch by inch, rising toward her mouth like she had all the time in the world.

Luke's face twisted.

She wouldn't. Would she?

He weighed it, fast. Maybe she *could* be trusted. She didn't seem like she had the reach to rat him out to anyone important, and his father already knew—*Hermes knew*—Luke shuddered at the memory, bile rising in his throat.

And if *he* knew…

He didn't want to finish that thought.

Luke exhaled sharply through his nose.

"It's a Roman god," he said flatly. "You know. Commerce guy. Lord Mercator and all that."

Abigail stilled. Her eyes went wide—almost cartoonish.

"Another pantheon?"

"Yes." Luke gestured pointedly to the jar. "Now hand it back."

She did, movements loose, like her limbs hadn't caught up to her brain yet.

"Why would a foreign god help you?" she asked, voice thoughtful now. Like she was still trying to glue the shape of the world back together. "A *Roman* at that… they're not exactly known for being sentimental."

Luke stilled.

"You know about the Romans?"

Abigail scoffed faintly. "Of course I do. There are Roman demigods here too. Stiff types. Like Hylla. We're not supposed to talk about it—Mistress makes that clear if you ever plan to leave. Says this place is meant to stay neutral. Separate."

She tilted her head, watching him.

"But most of us don't leave anyway. And if we do… we don't talk. That's enforced too."

Luke's mind spun, cataloguing the new information and turning it over with that same bitter efficiency he always defaulted to under pressure. And yeah—it tracked. Circe's island had been around for God knows how long.

Roman and Greek demigods coexisting in this strange pocket of timeless femininity?

Bound to happen.

And if word had to stay quiet outside…

Of course she'd have failsafes in place.

Luke frowned.

*How*, exactly? Some kind of spell? A curse? Something that coiled around your throat and choked the truth out of you before it could ever be spoken?

He shivered. The idea left a bad taste in his mouth.

"I get it," he muttered, more to himself than to her. "But look, Roman or not, that's not the point right now. The point is me. And Riri."

Abigail scoffed. "You seriously think a Roman god interfering in a Greek quest isn't a *big deal*? That's, like, war-starter level stuff."

Luke didn't dignify that with an answer. He was well-practiced in the art of silence, especially when it came to things he couldn't explain. Or didn't want to.

"Look," he gestured toward the chocolates, still glittering faintly. "The note said if I eat one, it'll protect me. Maybe it's like moly—what our father gave Odysseus—"

"—and you better not touch me again or I'll—"

He didn't get to finish.

A yell pierced the air, sharp enough to sever the thread of thought clean in two.

Luke broke off mid-sentence. Abigail was already turning toward the door, and he seized the chance to snatch up the chocolate piece she'd been threatening, shoving it into his sash. He composed himself as if nothing had happened, while she scowled, like the air itself had personally insulted her, patience worn down to nothing.

Which, to be fair, they had been in the middle of a pretty important debrief session—important in Luke's completely objective and unbiased opinion, of course.

Still frowning, he straightened, drifted over to the large window across the room, and leaned out, eyes scanning for the source of the yelling until—

There.

Hylla.

Weird. Luke knew she wasn't exactly fond of Abigail and hadn't seemed eager to be around her, even with Luke in the room. Not that he thought he was *that* charming. They'd only just met.

And—

Wait.

Luke blinked. Rubbed his eyes. Brow creased. Blinked again. Squinted.

Nope. Still there.

"…Clarisse?"

She stood at the door, chiton loose around her frame, hair braided into a crown. Her face twitched the moment she saw him. Her mouth opened, then shut—once, twice. Her eyes darted to Hylla, then to Abigail, who appeared at Luke's side. And just like that, Clarisse adjusted, careful not to say his name, though the look on her face didn't vanish.

*Clever girl,* Luke thought, vaguely proud.

"…I thought you were dead." Her voice was quiet. Off. Nothing like the shouting from earlier. Nothing like her usual self.

Luke felt it land. A pang, sharp and sudden, right in the ribs.

"I'm not," he said, voice light but deliberate. "Lúcia is alive and in one piece."

He rested his elbows on the sill, casual, but the message was clear: *play along.*

"Wait—you two know each other?" Hylla asked, eyes flicking between them.

"I do," Luke said easily. "Now, is she supposed to be our new roommate, or…?"

"Absolutely not," Abigail cut in. "I'm already housing one problematic little shit. That quota's full."

Hylla shot her a look—silent, judgmental.

"You can't exactly refuse a new roommate, Abigail," she said flatly. Then muttered, "You should deal with the problematic ones. I already put up with the docks. You just lounge around here."

"What was that, Hylla?" Abigail asked, saccharine-sweet.

"Nothing," Hylla replied breezily, too quickly. Then she turned, back to business. "Clarisse will be staying here until she decides what she wants to do—"

"And what about the guy I arrived with?" Clarisse cut in, rust-red eyes slicing toward her. The barely restrained aggression in her voice made the air shift.

Hylla met her stare without flinching.

"The Mistress is receiving him. Don't worry."

Luke blinked. *Wait.*

*...Fish brat?*

“That’s not an answer,” Clarisse snapped, arms crossed like she was preparing for war. “You just took Percy and didn’t let me go with him—”

*Percy.*

A stone dropped into Luke’s gut.

*Percy is here.*

*Percy is with Circe.*

*Percy is with Circe—*

Luke’s pulse stuttered.

He had to do something.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for reading ♥

(I’ll probably write a proper author’s note later)

# Chapter 65: SoM - The Shape of a Spell

Chapter Summary

> Luke and Abigail head to Circe's house pretending they just want a lesson, but really, they're trying to get to Percy before something awful happens. Circe brings him out—bound and clearly scared—and while Abigail keeps up the act, Luke scrambles to stay calm and think fast. Talk of potions and beast spells makes everything worse. He remembers Mercury's chocolate and starts getting anxious.
>
> Was it meant to protect or reverse?
>
> Is it even going to help Percy?

Chapter Notes

> I am alive

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"You shouldn't test your luck," Abigail hissed, her eyes locked on him.

Luke could feel it like heat pressed to the side of his face. Still, he didn't look her way. His gaze stayed fixed on Clarisse, who stared back at him—guilty and lost all at once, even if she kept the mask up. Anger etched into her features, arms crossed, feet planted like she meant to root there. She shot glares at Hylla from time to time, but she wasn't moving.

"She has Percy," Luke murmured, finally dragging his gaze back to his sister. The glare was already waiting for him, sharp enough to slice, but her jaw was tight in a way Luke knew.

*Worry*.

"He's just a kid," he said, quieter now. His hand found her arm, fingers curling there for a moment—maybe to steady her, maybe to steady himself.

He'd only just gotten her back—

"And what do you have planned, genius?" Abigail snapped. Her brows twitched. Her mouth pulled down, and for a second something slipped past her expression before she shut it down again.

She ran a hand through her braids, rough enough to tear them loose, strands coming undone fast.

“You can’t just barge in and demand things from her,” she went on. “You’re a newcomer. You got here yesterday. What reason do you even have to go knocking on the Lady of the Island’s door and stirring up gods know what?”

Her hand dropped. Luke caught the way her fists clenched.

“She’ll suspect something. And if she figures it out—”

“Who says I’m going to demand anything? I’m not stupid,” Luke shot back, clicking his tongue. “I’ll just go there and feel things out, see if I can… trick her,  or convince her.”

*Convince.*

He echoed the word in his mind, doubt already creeping up his spine like cold fingers. He remembered how unnerving she’d been—how the air had felt too stifling, how her gaze had seemed to peel back skin.

How everything could’ve gone wrong if he’d been even a little more unlucky—

He bit his lip, eyes flicking over Abigail’s face—the tightness around her eyes, the tension pinched into her mouth.

He sighed.

“I’ll be fine. I—I have to go. He’s my responsibility. And I don’t want him to end up like Riri.”

A pause.

“Ryan,” Luke corrected himself softly, his hand coming to rest on the window frame as he stared at the wolf lying in the grass outside. The animal’s ears were pricked, but he didn’t move.

He heard Abigail shuffle beside him, stepping up to the window to watch the man-turned-wolf. She said nothing, and Luke didn’t turn to look at her. Didn’t want to see what expression she was wearing now.

Was she sneering again, the way she had with all the beasts since he got here? Pitying, because she’d known Ryan? Or worse—was she neutral? That, somehow, felt like the most terrible option.

Neutrality meant routine. And that meant the rot had already started to feel like it belonged.

He didn’t want that brainwashing for her. Didn’t want Ryan to be a wolf. Didn’t want Percy caught in Circe’s grip.

There were a lot of things Luke didn’t want.

His hands tightened on the frame.

But here he was anyway.

“Then I’ll go with you,” Abigail said, cutting through the silence. Her voice was quiet.

Luke blinked, whipping his head to look at her.

“Abigail—”

“I’ll go with you,” she repeated, firmer now. Her blue-purple eyes narrowed in warning, sharp and heavy.

Then—just barely—she softened. Luke saw it. He knew his sister too well not to: the soft belly beneath all her spikes, the pain she carried that mirrored his in ways he sometimes hated to recognize. Different scars, same weight.

“I’ve been here longer than you,” she said. “And I’m good at magic. It’d be less suspicious if I went there and you—sister—” she gestured to all of him, a flick of her fingers with dry sarcasm “—just tagged along. A veteran student, talented, going to her teacher’s house to ask for advice because the other instructors suck. And she brings her newbie sibling with her for moral support. That’s all.”

Luke’s jaw tightened. But… she wasn’t wrong.

He turned it over in his mind. It would give him a way in—a plausible reason to approach Circe’s house. Abigail was right: he was just a newcomer, with no standing, no status. No reason to demand an audience with the highest-ranked woman on the island.

But—

“And what makes you think she’ll let us see Percy?” he asked, softer now, voice threading with doubt. His fingers twitched, then stilled. “That just sounds like we’d sit through some impromptu lesson and be expected to forget about the kid she got her hands on.”

His hands pressed harder into the windowsill.

“I need to save him.”

His sister immediately huffed.

Luke cast a glance at her from the corner of his eye, already bracing for a harsh rebuttal—but instead, she reached out and squeezed his arm.

“You will,” she said. She didn’t look at him, but her hand didn’t let go.

“You will.”

Luke turned to stare at her, words catching in his throat.

“But you don’t have to do this alone,” she added, quieter now. “You have me.”

His throat worked. Pressure built in his chest, sharp and sudden, and his eyes stung.

He blinked it back, looked out the window again, then cleared his throat.

“But what if she doesn’t let us see him?” he whispered.

Abigail didn’t answer right away. She held on a second longer before her fingers slipped away. Luke turned when he heard her sigh—a tired, worn sound.

“There’s a way,” she said at last. “But you won’t like it.”

“I don’t have to like it,” Luke replied, fingers drumming against the windowsill. “It just has to work.”

“You—” she started, then made a frustrated sound and dragged her hands down her face. “Okay. Okay. Look.”

She peeked at him through her fingers.

“I’ve been here a year. I’m good at magic—don’t make that face, it’s true—but I…”

She paused again, shaking her head as her hands dropped to her sides.

“I’ve never seen a man become a beast before. But the Mistress—she shows them to the students sometimes. The ones who stay long. The ones who are good at magic. Maybe even teaches them. A little. Maybe.”

*See… a man become a beast?*

Luke repeated the words in his mind, blinking like that might help them make sense.

But no.

They stayed just as senseless—just as cruel.

Even when he rolled them over again, trying to twist them into something less awful. Something that didn’t feel so casual. So… normal.

*This place is cursed.*

“She—she teaches you how to turn men into animals? Like it’s normal?” Luke asked softly, his eyes flicking over Abigail’s face.

He caught it—the tiny tightening in her jaw, the flicker of discomfort before she tucked it back under that unimpressed mask she always wore.

“Yes. She does,” Abigail said, biting the inside of her cheek. Her gaze slipped toward Ryan—but only for a moment—then snapped back to Luke.

Her eyes locked with his and didn't blink. Like looking away would be surrender. Or confession.

But Luke couldn't read her. Not now.

He was still reeling. Still trying to make this fit inside his head.

And really, he shouldn't be surprised.

"Of course," he breathed, a joyless laugh catching in his throat before it died.

His face smoothed into something flat.

"Of course."

Abigail sighed again, then muttered under her breath, lower this time, more careful, "Look, it happens. And every single woman on this island—mortal, demigod, nymph, whatever—thinks it's normal. So if you keep reacting like that… people are going to notice. Or think you're weird. Like they already do with Jade. And you don't want that."

She flicked a glance toward Hylla and Clarisse near the door, still arguing where Abigail had begrudgingly let them inside.

"And your friend over there? She's masking it well. And I know you are too," she added, bumping her shoulder lightly against his. "You did well in the lesson. Kept your cool—even if you didn't do much or say anything. You might even be a little talented, I *guess*. Which helps here. But—"

She locked eyes with him.

"But you can't freeze like that. Can't act like you expect someone to guess what you are. Can't be shocked when they treat men like animals—because to them, they are. Even Jade, for all she defends them, sees them more like pets than people."

Her eyes swept over him—his chiton, his jewelry.

"You're lucky. You pass well. You act well. New girls always get a little leeway. Once, I… anyway." She exhaled sharply. "You still have to be careful, Luke."

"I know," Luke shot back, his voice sharpening slightly. "But this is not normal."

Abigail sent him a long look.

"It might not be. But this is her island. And she rules this place."

She opened her mouth like she was going to say something else, then stopped, scowled, and muttered instead, "Right. You've got to go save your brat. Fine. Do it. But be smart about it. Don't go around making that face like you're better than anyone here unless you *want* them sniffing around. You want to survive this? Blend in. Can you do that?"

Her tone turned sharp, edged with challenge.

Luke stared at her for a long moment. Then finally—

"…I can. But I won't like it."

"As you said, little brother," she huffed, "you don't have to like it. It just has to work."

"Smartass," he muttered, smiling a little when she smacked his arm.

She didn't smile much—but this time, she almost did.

"Just so you know, if this goes wrong, we're both screwed—and I'll haunt you forever," Abigail muttered, flipping her hair and storming toward the door.

Luke snorted, falling into step beside her. "You can't, oh creature of the underworld. Once you cross over, there's no coming back."

"I take myself out of the underworld," she huffed. "Unlike you, I've got dead-realm perks. Dad can't trap me—and let's be honest, he'd probably find it hilarious."

"Probably," Luke murmured. His voice dipped, his thoughts snagging.

He didn't want to think about Hermes.

"Where are you going?" Clarisse's voice cut in, interrupting herself halfway through the question. She glanced between them, then looked down, scuffing her heel.

*Guilt*.

She looked at him like he was already dead—and she'd helped sign the sentence.

Luke's expression softened. His mouth opened.

Abigail beat him to it.

"Away. To the Mistress' house."

"What for?" Hylla cut in, arms crossed, unimpressed.

Abigail mirrored the posture immediately—only better. Meaner. More practiced. Hylla faltered first, uncrossing her arms with a shaky exhale.

"I just got here with your new roommate. You can't just leave—"

"I can. And I will." Abigail didn't miss a beat. "And brat, I never agreed to this new-roommate crap. Go dump your charity projects on someone else. I already have my sister—" she flicked a hand toward Luke without looking at him "—who showed up *yesterday*, by the way. And now today? Another one? No thanks."

Hylla's face shifted through a kaleidoscope of emotions—none of them good—while Clarisse snorted beside her and rolled her eyes. Pointedly. Very, *very* pointedly.

Luke had a thought.

*Oh, dear Lord. Abigail and Clarisse are the same kind of nightmare. And neither of them are helping right now.*

"Abigail—" Luke tried, casting a glance at Hylla—her ears already turning a deep shade of red—but his sister hit him with a look that said *shut it,* and kept talking.

"We just got back from a pathetic excuse of a lesson with that bitch Olenoe," she snapped. "And I actually want to learn something, so I'm going. And I'm taking her—" she jabbed a thumb toward Luke "—because I don't trust her alone. She might let you idiots turn my house into a playground."

Hylla's face did another loop of emotions, then finally landed on cautious annoyance. "Okay. But what am I supposed to do with her?"

Clarisse raised an eyebrow, deeply offended to be talked about like furniture.

Luke understood that too well.

"Babysit her. Do whatever grunt job it is you do. I don't care," Abigail said with a shrug. "I've got places to be."

God, she was so rude. But—

Luke's gaze flicked to Clarisse, who was already watching him, brow furrowed in that telltale way that said *I know something's up but I'm trying not to blow it*. Smart. Smart enough to keep quiet. But still—

She needed something to do. Something useful. Something to keep her occupied and not pacing like a caged, starving lion with unresolved anger issues and a growing urge to maul the first lamb that wandered too close. She was restless. Regretful, maybe. He could see it in the clench of her jaw—frustrated, wound tight. And when she got like that, she always wanted to *do* something. Fix it. Redeem herself.

But what was she going to do? Just sit here and stew while he—

And then it hit him. Like a flicked-on lightbulb to the face.

*She should scout.*

Yes. Clarisse was Ares' brat, trained by Peter, raised in Cabin Five's loving embrace of violence. She knew tactics—or at least enough to make this work. Scouting, infiltration, exits. She could mark out where they'd hide when they got Percy out.

And—Luke's throat tightened—*Ryan*, too.

*If.*

No. *When.* He had to believe that.

“Hylla,” Luke jumped on the pause, softening his tone as he nudged Abigail aside. “Can you teach Clarisse like you taught me? You know, show her the ropes, introduce her to the place, get her familiar…”

He turned to Clarisse. Met her eyes.

*Scout*, he thought as hard as he could. *Get it. Pick the spots. Find the exits. Hiding places. Please, just get it.*

Clarisse blinked. Her eyes moved—Hylla, then Abigail, then back to Luke.

A beat.

Then she nodded.

Thank the Lord.

Luke nearly sagged in relief. One problem—*not solved*, but at least… contained. For now.

“Well,” Hylla said slowly, flicking an uncertain glance at Clarisse—who met her eyes with a raised brow.

Hylla’s brow twitched. Her whole face scrunched up, like she'd just bitten into something sour. She glared at Clarisse, tone sharpening with the bite of a grudge. “I can do that.”

“Great, great,” Abigail cut in, clapping her hands slowly, like she was applauding a show she had zero patience for. “Everyone’s busy with something, so now move. Let’s do something useful and get out of my house.”

Luke barely held back an eye roll, trading an exasperated glance with Hylla—who almost smiled.

“Clarisse is… a bit much,” he muttered as they stepped through the door. “So maybe try a little patience. But—” he sighed, tipping his head like a martyr, “don’t let her steamroll you. That girl sniffs out weakness like a dog with a bone.”

“Don’t worry,” Hylla whispered back, deceptively sweet—too much vitriol packed in for such a nice voice. “I know how to handle dogs.”

Luke blinked, sending her a wide-eyed look, but Abigail yanked him away before he could even think of what to say to *that*.

*What the hell,* he thought, blinking as she dragged him along like a woman on a mission. *Hylla was so sweet to me—where did this version come from?*

Maybe this was foreshadowing, the slip of what would one day make her rise through the ranks of the Amazons, all the way to queen… or something like that.

"Lúcia," his sister called, pointedly, finally releasing his arm once they'd put enough distance between them and the others. "I'll do the talking, you keep quiet. You don't know anything, anyway. It's better if I handle it and get us the lesson. Or rather—me."

Luke gave her a side-eye.

"Yes, sister. I will be very, *very* quiet. Extremely unassuming. Deeply forgettable," he deadpanned, voice dry as the desert and just as unimpressed.

What he really meant was: *You talk. I sneak off. We get the brat.*

Abigail snorted, lips twitching in mockery.

"Forgettable," she echoed. "Look, that thing you did in the lesson? I saw it. Jade saw it. Olenoe definitely saw it—and probably ran her mouth, too. So yes, fine, you've got a little talent. And you know what happens to girls who show even that much?"

She snapped her fingers, then spread her hand.

"The Mistress pays attention. Because she likes it. Magic, I mean. And girls who like magic too—pride of the craft and all that. She eats it up."

Abigail's voice dropped. "Which means she'll be watching. And that means we have to be —"

Luke's expression sobered.

"Clever," he finished.

Abigail nodded, face set, pace unbroken. "If we play it right, we might get a glimpse of the brat. And—by the gods, don't give me that look—yeah, we might have to ask for the beast spell. If that's what it takes."

She glanced at him sideways, eyes narrow, then looked ahead again.

"…Last resort. Or maybe she'll offer it herself." She shrugged. "Maybe she already did it, and we just don't know it yet. Either way—don't go all righteous and high-and-mighty. She won't like that."

*What. The. Fuck.*

The beast spell? On Percy?

What was Abigail thinking—turning Percy into one of the *beasts*? That would go against everything they were trying to do. This was a rescue, not a… a man-turning-beast endorsement!

“And how exactly are we supposed to get Percy out if she turns him?” Luke asked, disbelief sharpening his tone.

Abigail didn’t answer. Not directly.

“You want to save the wolf too, don’t you?” she said instead, eyes fixed ahead as Circe’s house came into view, beautiful and eerie all at once.

Luke stopped dead.

He just—stopped, refusing to take another step, staring at Abigail’s back like it might give him answers.

She noticed. Paused. Sent him a glance over her shoulder—unreadable. And that only made it worse.

His thoughts reeled. Dots connected. Unconnected. Reconnected.

What was she planning? Why would she risk *that*? The entire point—the plan, *their* plan—was to get Percy out *before* Circe got her hands on him. Before she turned him into something non-human.

And now she was bringing up Ryan’s… situation too?

Luke bit down on the inside of his cheek. “…What exactly do you have in mind?”

“Just keep walking,” Abigail muttered, flicking him a look. “I’m on your side, okay? Trust me.”

*I do*, Luke thought, trailing after her in numb, heavy steps. *When it comes to me.*

*But the others…?*

*Has this place poisoned you, Abigail? Has it already sunk in that deep?*

He sucked in a slow, shaky breath and forced his spine straight, shoulders set like armor. His hands folded neatly in front of him, but they were burning—nerves screaming like static under his skin. He couldn’t let it show. Not now. Not with danger breathing down their necks.

Not when, as Abigail had drilled into him, *one* slip could mean exposure.

Luke had to control himself. Like he never had before.

His fingers trembled once. Just once. Then he stilled them.

“Mistress,” Abigail called, her voice crisp with respect as she knocked once on the door.

Silence stretched—long and thin, curling like smoke in the air. Luke shot her a glance, about to whisper something—

The door creaked open. By itself.

No one stood behind it.

“Come.”

Abigail stepped through the doorway without hesitation, her stride smooth, unbothered. Luke paused—just for a breath—then followed.

He’d been here yesterday. It had felt tense then, too, but now… now the air felt *different*. Heavier. Oppressive in a way that made his skin crawl. The walls felt closer somehow—like they were pressing in, watching. Judging.

Claustrophobic.

His heart picked up speed. Luke bit down on his lip, forcing his breathing slow as his eyes scanned the walls.

Carvings. He hadn’t looked at them properly before. Not really. But now they gleamed with a soft shimmer—*magic*—threaded through faint etched symbols.

One carving caught his eye. It held him like a hook in the ribs.

A woman, regal and cruel, surrounded by others dressed like ancient witches—hair wild, chitons (or robes?) flowing—circled a kneeling man.

Luke’s gaze moved of its own accord, tracing the sequence.

The next panel showed her forcing a vial to the man’s lips. And then—

The last one.

The man screamed. His body tore. Skin peeled into scales, his limbs twisting, reshaping—no longer human.

Luke’s stomach turned. He flinched and looked away, eyes locking hard to the floor.

*Please let us get Percy out before that.*

*Before it’s too late.*

They reached the office soon after. The hallway felt shorter this time—like the building itself wanted them there.

Abigail stopped in front of the door and turned to him. Her eyes met his, steady. She didn’t say a word.

She didn’t need to.

Luke gave a faint nod anyway.

That was enough. Her shoulders loosened—barely—and she turned back to knock.

The door creaked open on its own. Abigail stepped through without pause, and Luke followed close behind, every hair on his body already standing on end.

*She* was already there.

His eyes found her like a moth to flame. Circe stood by her table, tall and beautiful and *lethal*, just as she had been yesterday. She moved with the same ease—but the plants were different this time.

Luke noticed that.

She was grinding something fresh into her mortar and pestle, as if the act itself were part of a ritual. Something purposeful.

His mind flickered—unbidden—to the carvings on the wall outside.

"Abigail," Circe said, her voice wrapping through the air like silk thread—soft, gleaming, and ready to strangle. "What brings you here?"

Then she paused.

Luke saw the precise tilt of her head, the way her bubbled ponytail slid over one shoulder like a serpent coiling into view.

"And… our newcomer. *Lúcia*, was it?"

"Yes, Mistress," Abigail replied, inclining her head with the precise amount of respect. Almost alien to Luke.

But his mind wasn't focused on how out of character she sounded. Not right now.

"My sister," she added simply.

Circe giggled, light and airy, covering her mouth with one green-stained hand. Her eyes glittered—mirth, maybe.

"Oh, I *knew*," she cooed. "You two look alike—the same proof of your heritage written all over you." She tilted her head slightly, still smiling. "It only seemed right to house you together."

Her gaze slid to Luke, warm and radiant.

It made him feel cold.

"Especially since your sister seems to be *just* as talented," she added, her voice syrupy. "She could learn quite a lot, I think, alongside you, Abigail."

"Yes, Mistress, about that…" Abigail began, then let herself pause—just a breath. But even that pause, Luke noticed, felt deliberate. *Practiced*. He glanced at her, studying the curve of her spine, the set of her shoulders.

She didn't usually act like this.

Where, and when, had she learned this version of herself?

"I came to request a lesson under your wisdom," Abigail said, inclining her head deeper now. Her gaze dropped, lashes lowered, but not enough to hide the flick of her eyes—watching the witch-goddess from beneath the mask of deference. "I know it's presumptuous, but I wish to learn. And I believe my sister would benefit from it as well."

Circe made a soft, delighted sound—somewhere between amusement and indulgence.

"So stiff, even after a year, Abigail," Circe said, almost fondly. "Even after all the lessons I've given you."

She reached for a cloth and wiped her green-stained hands, casting a sly glance Abigail's way.

"And I'm well aware how… *challenging* you find it to study under Olenoe. And how difficult *she* finds *you* in return. A shame, truly. Olenoe is deeply skilled—but perhaps time will bring you into sisterhood. Or at the very least… tolerance."

"A *shame*," Abigail echoed. And there it was—the edge, the bite of her usual disdain slipping through.

Circe laughed, delighted, then clapped her hands together.

"Perhaps tolerance should be the goal," she said, amused. Then she rested her palms on the table behind her, fingers splayed, eyes drifting thoughtfully across the space—and to Luke. Measuring.

"Hmm. Lúcia is talented, yes, but still newly arrived. I'd prefer she begin with the basics. Even the gifted need a foundation. As you know, control and clarity are the ground on which —"

"Magic breathes," Abigail finished smoothly, straightening slowly.

Circe's eyes lit up. "Yes. Very good. You're improving, Abigail—by leaps and bounds. Perhaps I'll teach you something new today. Something I *normally* wouldn't offer to someone so green…"

She paused. Smiled.

"…But we've just gotten the perfect test subject."

Luke's eyes widened, just barely.

Abigail's foot nudged his.

*Keep your cool.*

“I’d be honored, Mistress,” Abigail said smoothly.

Luke echoed it a moment later, clumsier, stiff. His voice felt like it belonged to someone else.

*That’s Percy*, his mind screamed. *Percy’s here. Percy’s in danger—*

The snap of fingers cracked through the air.

And then—suddenly—*he was there*.

Bound. Silent. Percy.

His mouth was snapped shut, likely spelled that way—probably after mouthing off to someone, and Jesus, Luke had tried to teach him better. *Don’t insult gods. Don’t challenge them out loud.* They didn’t handle defiance well.

But Percy had that look in his eyes. Sea-green, wild, afraid. Fear clawed just beneath the stubborn set of his brow, and Luke felt something inside him seize. His heart lurched, fists curling.

He needed to do something. *Anything—*

Abigail stepped in front of him. Subtle.

“This boy washed up on the island,” Circe said lightly, her tone almost playful. “He’d been with a girl. Poor thing, burdened with such a *creature*.”

She rested a hand on Percy’s head.

He jerked away, but she was faster—fingers slipping mockingly through his messy hair. Stroking him like a pet.

“And you know what happens to men who dare to do that,” she added, smiling.

“Yes, Mistress,” Abigail replied again, voice even.

But Luke—Luke couldn’t think. Couldn’t breathe.

*Percy.*

Percy’s eyes locked on his.

And Luke felt it, like a blade to the chest:

*Save me, Luke. Please.*

His hands clenched at his sides.

“Come,” Circe said, already turning back to her table. “It’s a spell imbued within a potion—my specialty, pharmakeia. You must grind these specific herbs while chanting and weaving the Mist alongside them.”

Her voice filled the room, too smooth, too calm. She beckoned Abigail with one hand—elegant, stained green—and Abigail moved immediately, yanking Luke with her like luggage.

He stumbled forward, dazed, eyes still locked on Percy.

He couldn't look away.

His mind was blank and echoing all at once.

*I need to save him.*

*Save him. Save—*

"And does it change depending on the creature, Mistress?" Abigail asked, inquisitive.

Luke blinked at her, pulled out of the spiral just enough to glance over. She was focused entirely on Circe now—watching her hands, the placement of the herbs, the rhythm of her motions.

But Luke knew that glint in her eye. All of Hermes' children had it—Cabin Eleven's *signature*.

The glint of a plan.

And though it didn't quite bring relief, it steadied something in him. Slightly. Barely. But enough.

"Oh no, it's will that does it, not the words," Circe answered with a musical laugh, finishing her work and handing over a small vial to Abigail.

Abigail lifted it to her nose, smelling the contents.

"Sometimes it's not even difficult," Circe continued, almost cheerfully. "The shape changes to whatever fits best. Other times, I like to be creative. That takes a bit more effort."

"I see…" Abigail murmured. "And when the shape isn't to your liking, Mistress… do you have to undo it before reshaping it to fit your vision?"

Luke's eyes snapped to her.

*So that's—*

Circe hummed, tapping her fingers lightly against the table, considering.

"Yes, sometimes it's necessary," she admitted with a sigh. "It's bothersome, of course, but not difficult. Just more steps."

She waved a hand dismissively. "But you don't have to worry about that for now. I don't expect you to shape the form today—just let it take whatever comes most naturally. If it goes wrong, I have potions to reverse it. We'll simply try again."

*Potions.*

Luke stilled.

He felt Abigail glance at him—just a flicker from the corner of her eye—but it was enough. He knew.

She was thinking the same thing.

*They had to get those potions.*

But—

Luke's thoughts jumped—scattershot—to the chocolate Mercury had given him.

*Couldn't that work too?*

In canon, it had. Hermes had given Percy magical candies, and they'd been enough to undo Circe's spell. He frowned, hope pulsing beneath his ribs.

*Would it work here?*

But then—

A faint memory stirred. *The Odyssey.* Chiron's voice, droning through a morning lesson, came back to him—while Luke, half-frayed already, had tried to wrangle Cabin Eleven into something resembling civility.

Hermes had given Odysseus moly. A sacred plant, yes—but it hadn't reversed anything. It had protected Odysseus. Kept him from being transformed in the first place.

And Mercury—he'd spoken of Ulysses too. Of protection.

*Eat it when you face a foe greater than yourself. It will protect you.*

Luke's heart thudded.

Across the room, Percy trembled—bound and silent. Fear flickered beneath the anger in his eyes. Circe's voice danced through the air, guiding Abigail through each motion, each word. Herbs rhythmically hit the bowl with dull sounds.

Luke's skin prickled. His thoughts raced—half-formed and frantic.

*What is the chocolate closest to?*

*Protection… or reversal?*

*Which one did Mercury give me?*

Chapter End Notes

This month’s been kind of rough for me, but I’m back! 🎉

Abigail’s walking that morally gray tightrope—she cares about Luke, very older-sis-protects-younger-bro coded, but her choices are... questionable. She is helping, in her own way.

Clarisse is stewing in guilt and will get her moment later, promise. Her dynamic with Hylla plays into the whole Ares/Bellona parallel. They’re both children of war, and I figured they’d immediately get under each other’s skin, especially with Clarisse being, well... Clarisse.

Percy’s been caught, and things aren’t exactly looking up for him right now. Or for Ryan. But I do have something planned—and it’s going to break canon in a fun way. (Remember the fish tank? Yeah. That’s going to be relevant very soon...)

Also! Pic of Circe because I forgot to drop it here last time, lol.

/>

Thanks for reading! ❤️❤️❤️ I appreciate and read all your comments!!

So... will Percy end up turning into an animal? 👀

# Chapter 66: SoM - Corrected

Chapter Summary

Percy is changed, and the complications keep coming.

Chapter Notes

Warning: body horror and dehumanization of a kid (aka Percy)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The fumes curled upwards, smoke thickening the air with cloying sweetness, like oleander, a threat masked in beauty.

"Perfect," Circe murmured, her voice rising with the scent, lilting and delicate, the final hammer to Luke's sanity. Candlelight, set at each corner in a pattern too precise to be meaningless, cast flickering shadows across the wooden table, herbs and tools stretching long and monstrous—like giants woken from slumber.

At the goddess's side, Abigail ground the final ingredients, fingers clenched white around the pestle. Her expression was still—chiseled from ice—but Luke saw the tremor. Subtle, fleeting, but there.

He curled his fists, clutching the fabric of his chiton in tight, crossed hands.

With a smile, Circe stepped away from the table in one fluid motion. The glowing symbols on her chiton shimmered faintly, while its three slits swirled around her legs with effortless grace.

"It is done, Abigail. Come," she called, her pupiless eyes catching a glint Luke hesitantly labeled gleeful, as if she'd brewed the potion herself.

His breath trembled, teeth pressed hard into his cheek until the metallic tang of blood bloomed on his tongue. Maybe this was why the women followed her; the absence where conscience and humanity should live, veiled beneath a motherly mask and a prideful glow so convincing it felt real.

That was the worst part.

Circe looked truly, heartbreakingly proud of Abigail's work.

“Let’s test it, shall we? But fear not; if it fails, I’ll fetch the reversal potions and we’ll simply try again.” She glanced over her shoulder, lioness eyes creased with warmth, ponytail swishing gracefully to one side. The picture of friendliness, until Luke spotted the small bone threaded through her hair, catching the warm light with a pale gleam. “No pressure, my dear.”

A shiver crawled up his spine. His mouth opened, then closed, words trapped behind his teeth. He wanted to speak, to stop this. Maybe even demand that this… thing in human skin undo whatever she’d done to Ryan.

But Luke said nothing. He only watched as the witch glided toward Percy, her ponytail swaying with each step. Her bare feet moved soundlessly across the ground—he hadn’t noticed that before. Around her ankles, a pendant shimmered with blood-red jewels, each one catching the light like fresh-spilled blood. Luke wondered if they were trophies from her victims. The thought turned his stomach, so he shoved it away.

Abigail followed behind at a measured pace, her spine straight as a metal rod.

As she passed him, she flicked a glance his way. Her lips were pressed into a line so thin it looked carved, as if a knife had cut it there and called it a mouth.

*Too calm,* something inside him snarled, clawing at his ribs. Abigail had never been kind to their brothers—

*No.*

He couldn't afford to think like this now.

“Lúcia, dear, come closer. This will be a learning experience for you as well.” Circe clasped her hands, her expression soft. “You won’t be trying anything today, of course. You’re still so new, and I know, darling, it must all feel terribly overwhelming. But I believe this will be… valuable.”

She winked, playfully. Luke’s stomach twisted.

“You’ll see just how far you can go. Isn’t that exciting?”

“Ah—yes, Mistress. That’s very kind of you. I appreciate the opportunity…” Luke stammered, rubbing his forearm as he stepped forward, each foot dragging slightly.

*How funny,* he thought, mind working in slow motion. His polite, meek smile stayed fixed, frozen in place like a statue’s. *A witch like that, thought of as kind.*

Unbidden, his gaze drifted to the center of the room. Perhaps it was just his fraying mind dulling everything, but the space looked bare—purposefully so. Unlike the livelier corner they’d just left behind, this area was nothing more than a patch of exposed wood, lit from directly above like a spotlight on a stage. Behind it, the tank rippled in the dark, its surface catching light like a curtain of dread waiting to rise.

Luke's breath stuttered, jaw clenched tight. There—set like livestock—was Percy. Bound and trembling, placed at the center of a witch’s office, already being treated as something less

than human.

A child. Percy was just a child.

*No.* Luke wiped his clammy palms on his chiton. *He's already less than human to her. The transformation just makes him match the truth she's already decided on.*

"Mistress, I think… I think I'd prefer to have the reversal potions here." Abigail's voice cut in, frayed at the edges.

Luke studied her from the corner of his eye. She didn't look at him either—her chin dipped, face carefully averted—but he caught the briefest flicker in his direction, too measured to be natural. Then her gaze dropped again, straying toward Circe every so often. Her fingers twitched once, stilled… then, almost like a ritual, began to fidget, wrangling against each other as if the movement had been rehearsed a thousand times.

"It would be comforting to have it here," she said softly, "to mend any mistakes that might come from my inexperience."

*Mistakes.*

Luke's fingers tapped against his arms, restless. His gaze flicked from Abigail's careful performance, to Circe's deepening frown, to Percy's sheet-white face.

And then—without thinking—he decided.

"If I may, Mistress, I think it would be interesting to see it in action," Luke said softly, pitching his voice sweet, an artificial saccharinity that reeked of meekness.

When Circe's gaze snapped to him, he shifted, clasping his hands delicately before him, eyes lowered just enough.

Perceived submission. It had often worked on his father.

"Oh, sweethearts," Circe tutted, like a weary teacher indulging unruly children. She drifted from Abigail to Luke, tilting his chin up with a single finger. The touch was fleeting, but still he had to suppress a shiver. "You don't need to cower here—neither of you."

Her hands rose slowly, elegantly, as though to encompass the whole room.

"This island is ours. A safe, perfect place. Here, you won't be mocked or humiliated; no mistake will earn you scorn. Instead, they will—"

She paused. Smiled. The kind of smile that never touched her eyes.

"—be corrected. But never will you be thought lesser for a few… slips."

*Slips,* Luke echoed inwardly, his heart pounding against his ribs. *What does she mean by slips?*

Circe’s gaze settled on him, her expression a grotesque parody of fondness. She placed a hand between his shoulders and steered him forward, her touch light but undeniably firm.

“But it's not your fault, dears,” she said, voice soothing. “The outside world is often so, so cruel. But no matter—you’re here now.”

Luke's mouth worked, words already gathering at his tongue, until a sudden tap against his foot killed them. From the corner of his eye, he saw Abigail staring straight ahead, passing the vial into Circe’s waiting hand. Then her foot tapped again, hard enough to sting.

Discreetly, he nudged her back. But he understood the message perfectly well.

*Keep quiet.*

The liquid sloshed in the glass when Circe tilted it, shimmering a strange, deep red. It reminded Luke of the jars of strawberry jam he barely glanced at during supermarket runs; or maybe of dried blood.

"I'm not happy with it, Mistress." Abigail's tone was faintly mournful, even dissatisfied, like a model student tasting failure for the first time.

"Do not fret, dear. I've accompanied several young witches for far longer than your civilization has existed, and I must say: this is impressive, Abigail." Circe held up the vial, a soft *tap tap* echoing as she flicked her fingers against the glass. "See this shade? An intense, dark red, with just a shimmer of purple beneath the surface?" Her lips curled up, soft and wrong. "It's the perfect color—a success. On your first try, no less."

She tapped the vial against her palm, almost playful.

“And perfectly ready for testing.”

Luke's heart shuddered.

His fingers dug into the chiton, twisting the fabric so roughly that—had his mind not been drowning in panic—he might've feared it would tear.

*WhatcanIdowhatcanIdowhatcanIdo—*

Slowly, as if someone had taken a remote and dragged time into slow motion, Luke watched as Circe handed the poison over to Abigail. She took it and stood motionless, her eyes blank, like a canvas wiped clean after countless failed attempts. Then she turned her head toward Percy, staring at the pale, trembling boy with a face like a statue's, carved to remain forever still.

Her expression, when it came, was a mask of indifference—but not a flawless one.

Sorrow still screamed through the cracks.

For a moment, Luke felt a flicker of relief. If she was still trying to pretend, then she hadn’t gone numb. Not completely.

She stared for a long, long moment. Then, so slight he almost missed it, Abigail nodded.

Circe grinned, as terrible as an eclipse.

It took everything in Luke not to recoil—not to flinch in disgust, not to spit the word "monster," not to let his mask slip. He had to keep playing the role: the meek younger sister, cowed into silence by the Mistress. He forced himself to play along, to feign belief in the brainwashing, if only long enough to survive.

Just long enough to save those who had no hope but him.

He watched as Circe snapped her fingers, forcing Percy's mouth open with nothing but will and magic. The boy's tongue writhed, struggling to form words, but only choking sounds escaped, his wide, panicked eyes doing all the speaking he could not.

He watched as the witch guided Abigail, a steady hand pressed against her back. Her voice was soft, coaxing: "Now you pour it inside, dear. Slowly. We don't want him choking and spitting it all back out."

He watched as Abigail obeyed. The liquid glinted like an accusation, dark as sin, as she tipped it into Percy's open mouth. His protests were smothered with a flick of Circe's wrist, his limbs locked rigid. He gagged, sputtered, *"guh—!"* and coughed, until at last the vial ran dry.

Luke's heart stuttered.

Percy stared at him, sea-green eyes locked on him—and only him—brimming with terror, and worse: betrayal. Luke couldn't bear it. He squeezed his eyes shut, as if that could block out the silent accusation, too brief for Circe to notice.

But he couldn't shut out the guilt, spearing his ribs with all the finality of an executioner's blade.

"Now," Circe said brightly, clapping her hands together, "we observe the transformation. As always, I'll offer my critique: the speed of change, the nature of the animal, how it reflects both the potion and the… man in question. And of course, the finer details."

She clasped her hands, head tilted in keen interest.

"Look closely, Abigail. It's beginning already—a promising sign."

Unbidden, Luke's gaze slid to Percy, and heat flared in his chest like a burn. Bile surged, but he forced it down.

Percy was doubled over, spine arched like a bowstring. His fingers raked the ground in frantic scrapes, nails splitting under the force of his desperation, smearing red across the wood. His face twisted in agony, but his jaw was clamped shut. Not a sound escaped.

It was needlessly cruel.

But not the worst. No—the worst came next.

The boy's skin began to peel. Strips sloughed away as though a knife were paring him like an apple, flesh blooming raw and red beneath. Piece by piece, it fell. And as it did, glinting scales emerged from the carnage, pushing through ragged scraps of skin that clung stubbornly. A terrible beauty in the making—a second skin forming where the first was torn away.

Circe hummed, circling Percy.

"Scales like these suggest he'll become a fish," she mused, her voice soft, contemplative, more suited to admiring a painting than a person.

She stepped closer to the writhing boy, slid her fingers beneath his jaw, and forced his head up. Her nails pressed into his cheeks as she studied him, unhurried. At last, she released him.

"Fitting," she said. "From those eyes, I'd wager he's a son of the Sea. Rare, to find one washed ashore."

"Mistress…" Abigail began, her voice pitched carefully, trying to sound persuasive. Luke could see the strain in her posture. "Isn't it… overcomplicated to do this to a son of the Earthshaker? Perhaps we should use the reversal potion, to avoid offense."

*Yes.*

*Poseidon.*

Luke wanted to speak—to add his two cents, anything—but his throat wouldn't work.

"Oh, not to worry, dear," Circe laughed, her hair catching the light like strands of gold. "These sea-bright eyes aren't the first I've seen. And if the Lord of the Sea takes offense…"

Her expression tightened, souring.

"I'll claim my right to defend my land—as I always have. The Olympians know it well enough."

"But, Mistress—"

"I told you," Circe cut in, her gaze snapping to Abigail. Her eyes gleamed leonine, her aura flaring, overwhelming and oppressive.

"Not to worry."

A shiver slithered up Luke's spine. His chest tightened inward.

He couldn't breathe.

"…I understand, Mistress. I trust your judgment," Abigail finally said, tilting her chin down.

“Of course, dear. I keep this island’s best interests close to heart—you know that.” Circe’s mood flipped like a switch. The goddess folded herself down, her presence dimming, softening into something merely tolerable.

*Thump!*

Luke jolted and spun.

Percy had collapsed, trashing on the ground. Red streaks and torn scraps of flesh circled him, a painting of horror—macabre, cruel, and *real*. His mouth gaped in a silent scream while his muscles spasmed, shifting beneath his skin, as though something alive inside him was clawing to break free.

And then—

His body folded in on itself, limbs contorting at unnatural angles. The sound of bones shifting filled the air—*crack, crack, crack*—and Luke’s gut twisted as he watched, wide-eyed, while Percy’s legs fused into a single mass of flesh.

Scales erupted soon after, shimmering as they spread, consuming the last patches of skin. His spine writhed, arms shriveling into useless stubs before vanishing altogether. Worst of all was his face: features warping and pulling, eyes bulging in grotesque spasms, until what remained where Percy had been was only a fish.

“A little too long, and perhaps a touch more suffering than usual,” Circe remarked, entirely unfazed, like a teacher grading an exam. And perhaps that was all it was to her. “Still, very good for a first attempt. You should be proud, dear.”

With practiced grace, her chiton falling in careful folds around her, Circe knelt to observe the boy-turned-fish. Luke followed suit, his fists clenched tight on his sash, hands trembling.

The fish was the length of Luke’s arm, shoulder to hand, its scales a gleaming blue. Percy flopped helplessly against the wooden floor, as though still wracked by aftershocks of pain, or, maybe, trying to flee from the looming threat.

Slowly, Circe gathered Percy into her hands. At her touch, he went still, mouth gaping as though struggling for breath.

Could Percy breathe? Could he? He was a demigod—Luke froze, his stomach dropping. But now… now he was a fish.

He could only hope Percy could last, at least for a time, until they found a way to change him back, or get him to water.

“Hm. Seems our guess was right—the boy became a fish,” she said, turning the creature this way and that before fixing Abigail with a satisfied expression. “Well done, dear. Good job.”

*What?*

*Good job?*

Did that mean… there wouldn't be a reversal potion?

"…Thank you, Mistress," Abigail said, her face drawn tight, teeth pressed into her lip as though to bite back panic—her mind clearly racing for a solution.

But there wasn't an easy one.

Luke's vision had already begun to blur at the edges.

"If—if I may be so bold, I'd still like to see the potion's effects… on it," Abigail said, her tone cautious and tentative.

"Me too," Luke blurted, tripping over the words.

He flicked a glance at his sister, bit the inside of his cheek, and pushed forward.

"This is… it's so different from the lesson with Olenoe—"

"Your enthusiasm is wonderful to see," Circe said with a light chuckle, glancing between them as though they were eager students rather than desperate demigods scrambling to undo a cruel spell.

Yet beneath her amusement, Luke sensed something he didn't like.

"But that is a lesson for another day. Look."

She lifted Percy, her hand stroking lightly over the fish's scales.

"A complete success. No deformities, no lingering human features, and no grotesque mutations. The boy became a bluefish—an aggressive, voracious little creature. That alone tells us troubling things about his nature. But then…" She sighed, her tone dripping with theatrics. "He is a man. What else should we expect?"

His mouth moved before his brain could catch up.

"But you said… you said it could have flaws in the process, right? So maybe this isn't the most reflective transformation—"

Luke cut himself off mid-sentence, face pale.

"Oh?"

The sound was calm, almost amused.

Luke's hands trembled. He'd messed up. He really, *really* had.

Abigail was staring at him, rigid as stone, her eyes flicking toward Circe like a gazelle catching the scent of blood. He knew that look; he'd worn it often enough on the younger kids. If the moment weren't so dire, he might have laughed at the irony.

*I told you not to do the one thing—!*

“What a curious defense of a male, Lúcia.” Circe’s eyes fixed on him. *Lord, protect me, I’ve been a fool—*

“But don’t waste your time on empathy they don’t deserve. Men are unworthy of it—animals, every one of them.”

Luke flinched.

Circe’s features softened, settling into something almost sympathetic. She set Percy aside, and, with effortless grace, rose to her feet.

“But you are not one, dear. You were born unlucky, forced into a role you never deserved. And now…”

Her voice rose with righteousness, as though delivering truth to a child too young—or too insecure—to trust their own thoughts.

“Now, you’ve found your place.”

Luke swallowed dryly. He tried to smile, but his lips felt drawn in brittle strokes, thin and unconvincing. Circe seemed to take it for shyness. “I… I understand, Mistress. I—thank you.”

She studied him for a moment longer before stepping closer, leaning down to pat his cheek with light, almost playful taps. “No worries, dear. There are many like you here, and you are welcome. The world will not reach you here.”

Circe brushed a stray lock of hair back from his face.

“Such pretty hair… I wonder what it will look like if it ever grows. It may help you become who you were meant to be, my dear.” She laughed, though her eyes never left him. “But it’s your choice, of course. The modern days grant women a few freedoms—short hair among them, I hear. A small victory, perhaps, though men remain the same beasts they have always been.”

Luke felt like a small animal under a microscope—trapped, twitching, with nowhere to run.

“Mistress.” Abigail’s voice cut through, and Circe went still. At last, her hands slipped from Luke’s face. “Is the lesson complete?”

“No,” Circe tutted. “I still have one last thing to show.”

She turned toward the tall glass tank in her office—the same one Luke had noticed the last time. With a flick of her wrist, Percy rose from the ground and drifted into her waiting arms. She extended him toward the glass.

Luke blinked—once, then again.

Her hands slid into the surface as if it were nothing but light, as though the tank itself were a hologram.

But it wasn't.

Inside, bubbles rose from the corners, the water rippling with the disturbance as Percy was set within—proof that there was water behind the glass, proof that both were real.

*Water—how had her hands passed through? The Mist? It had to be… but so subtle. Or was it her divinity?*

Percy twitched, then swam, awkward at first, looping in short, startled circles before settling into a rhythm, as though learning this new body. Yet he never strayed far from where she had set him.

He was breathing. Relief steadied Luke's hands—briefly—before the truth returned: Percy was trapped.

Luke's feet carried him forward like a puppet on strings, drawing him to the tank.

He hesitated, then set one hand against the glass. His eyes followed Percy's path, each clumsy lap sending ripples across the water's surface.

He couldn't read a fish's face. But Percy looked confused, and so, so afraid.

*Who wouldn't be?*

Then Circe's voice sliced the moment in two.

"Behold—my dearest pet."

That was when he saw it.

The beast behind the glass appeared, as if summoned from the shadows, the pale sleek of its skin reflecting the faint light that Circe's room allowed. And it was enormous. Full of teeth. Sleek and *monstrous*.

A great white shark. Massive.

*No, no, no, no—don't let it see Percy,* Luke prayed, panic surging. His eyes went wide as he pressed against the glass until his nose touched it, as if sheer will could make the surface turn to smoke, let him reach through, seize Percy, drag him from danger.

But hope was useless.

The shark's eyes fixed on the intruder in its tank—cold, dead, and unblinking. And in them Luke saw nothing of the man who had been there before.

"I named him, once."

Luke stiffened, forcing his gaze away.

Beside him, Circe laid a hand against the glass—like one might greet a pet. Not a beloved companion, but something still of use: a guard dog, tolerated if no longer cherished. Her nail traced a slow line across the surface as her eyes lifted, following the shark as it drifted above. Smaller fish scattered in its wake, as though the water already belonged to it.

And it did. Its massive body loomed, large enough that Luke could only compare it to a small bus.

She pressed her palm flat against the tank, her smile widening as her eyes grew colder—burning like an old sun, long gone cold, all heat turned to fury turned to nothing.

"I cut his hair. Dressed him. Made him something else. And then I gave him a name." A soft tap against the glass. "Riven."

A pause. A smile, more genuine this time. Her eyes shone like she was sharing a secret—or maybe a victory—something she thought should be celebrated.

"He who was torn apart."

Luke didn't look at her. He kept his gaze on the tank, on the shark, his hands clenched tight at his sides as if that would stop the reaction clawing its way up his spine.

*Who's the real monster?*

"And now he tears others," she finished lightly, tilting her head toward him. Horror clawed through Luke—*this was the monster.* Her face was serene, utterly unbothered, her eyes emptied of anything human.

Circe looked so *satisfied*.

He dragged his gaze forward, heart lodged high in his throat, breath coming shallow. He couldn't speak. Through the buzzing in his ears, he caught Abigail saying something inane, "A very good choice of name, Mistress," or something like it, but he wasn't listening.

One moment the shark was still as a corpse, suspended weightless in water, and the next—

The shark moved.

Too fast.

Luke's heart lurched.

*Percy—*

"Mistress."

For a moment, Circe didn't react. Behind the glass, the shark drove after Percy, the water rippling violently as the boy-fish darted frantically, slipping away by centimeters. Luke's hands pressed against the tank, his heart leaping as the predator lunged—its jaws gaping, rows of teeth closing, Percy all but swallowed—

And then, at the last instant, Percy veered. The shark bit down on nothing but water.

*Snap.*

The shark froze. Its massive body twitched, eyes going blank and glassy. Then, with lazy strokes, it turned and drifted back into the shadows, suddenly indifferent to its would-be prey.

*Thank the Lord—!*

Percy circled the tank nervously, never straying far from the light, as though afraid the shark might return.

Luke watched until the predator vanished completely from sight, and even then for a while longer. When at last he turned back, he caught Circe with her hand still raised, fingers tilted just so, as though she had only just snapped them. Her gaze, unreadable, lingered on Percy for a heartbeat before she turned toward the entrance. She left without a word, her hair swishing behind her.

His eyes followed her to the massive door, where another witch waited, one he didn't recognize. They leaned close, speaking in tones too soft for him to catch.

Behind him came Abigail's steps, then her whisper at his ear.

"We have to find out where she keeps the reversal potions."

Luke clenched his hands tight. "And how to get him out of this tank. It's solid, and she's made it almost insubstantial."

"We could—"

"Ships circling the island?" Circe hissed, the words sharp. "Even after all the warnings I sent?"

"They claim they come in peace, Mistress," the other woman blurted, her voice trembling as though the news itself unsettled her. "They spoke of sending an envoy—one less insulting than the last, they swore. But… they said nothing of the guards."

He glanced sideways. Abigail met his eyes—just for a second—then turned back to Circe and the woman by the door.

Circe was silent for a beat too long.

"A woman," she said at last, softly. "And they think that alone will be enough to sway me."

She exhaled through her nose, then flicked her hand, graceful, but edged with steel.

"Let them come. I'll hear what they have to say. And when they're finished…" Her voice dipped lower. "…I'll decide what they're worth."

"Of course, Mistress."

“Dismissed.”

Luke watched the witch bow and slip outside. When Circe turned back, her face had settled into that familiar, vaguely motherly expression she always wore, yet now there were cracks. Several, in fact.

He dropped his gaze at once, and Abigail did the same, pretending Percy’s drifting in the water was the most fascinating thing she’d ever seen.

“Oh, dear. I’m afraid I must cut the lesson short,” Circe said with mock regret. “Something urgent requires my attention, as I’m sure,” her smile sharpened, “you both heard.”

Her laugh rang through the room, rich and false.

“This office has such echoing walls. No privacy at all. A flaw in the design—mine, of course.”

Luke let out an awkward giggle, thin and frayed. The fine hairs on his arms and the back of his neck prickled upright.

He edged closer to Abigail—just slightly.

She didn’t glance his way, but shifted her stance, angling herself toward Circe, placing herself just enough in front of him to shield.

Affection swelled in his chest, sudden and fierce, snuffed out a heartbeat later by fear.

There was something in the air.

Circe still wore her mask, but Luke could *see* it: her aura, bright and coiled like a serpent. It unspooled slow and sinuous, testing the air as though it could smell their fear. Drawn by the scent. Stirred by the promise of mice.

Their rescue plan was ruined.

Maybe worse.

“But it’s all right,” Circe murmured, lifting her arms. The greenish tints on her fingers shimmered in the dim light, like poisonous vapor from a potion’s fumes.

“This will be corrected. Don’t worry.”

The aura surged.

Luke panicked. His hands jerked upward—useless—until his mind latched onto one desperate thought, like stumbling on a bottle of water in the desert.

*Mercury’s chocolates.*

The only thing he could think of.

Salvation or reversal—either would do.

His hands fumbled at his sash as he edged further behind Abigail, hiding his torso from Circe's cold, laughing eyes. Clumsy fingers closed on the tiny piece of salvation—the one he'd meant for Percy. He snatched it up and shoved it into his mouth.

And just in time.

The aura closed in, coiling around him and Abigail. It circled their heads with a gentleness so mocking it felt like a lullaby, whispering soft nothings: that everything was fine, that they had seen nothing, that this was normal.

*That they were safe.*

It was a lie.

But Luke's mind wanted to believe. Everything blurred, hazy as a dream, soft and warm. He could believe it. He *wanted* to. It would be so easy to sink into that gentle thought, to forget, to let go—

Something pushed back.

The haze thinned, peeling away bit by bit, like the slow rousing from sleep. Thought returned, and Luke could think again.

"What—" Abigail gasped, lurching like a puppet with its strings yanked, suddenly alive again. She twitched, eyes darting as though she'd woken in the wrong place.

Her eyes met Luke's for the briefest heartbeat before sliding back to Circe.

Then the mask returned: the polite, perfect student. Yet behind it flickered a dazed confusion, as though part of her still lingered in a place Luke could not follow.

His heart dropped.

"You two girls just had a lesson with me," Circe said, her voice glowing with the same light as her eyes, a guiding torch that led only to ruin.

"It was a fruitful morning. Abigail, you showed promise. And Lúcia, the curiosity we so prize here. Both of you did well. And now, you deserve rest."

Abigail blinked.

Luke didn't dare breathe.

"Go home," Circe murmured, her motherly mask flawless as the doors swung open on their own. "You're dismissed."

Chapter End Notes

So, I’m back! 😅 I was feeling pretty burnt out, but DoF is finally back on track. Also, this chapter ended up way too big with too many twists crammed in, so I had to split it into two...

The bluefish is a species that’s common along the U.S. East Coast (including New York waters). They’re known for being aggressive, voracious predators, plus, they really are blue, so it just clicked for me, lol.

And yeah, Circe is… tricky. She bends everything to fit her vision, the way only a goddess can, but she’s also very much a witch in how she works. Abigail did her best to make a plan, while Luke was panicking the whole time… but now? Well, she’s forgotten that plan…

Thank you all for reading! I love your comments, and it’s always such a joy to hear your thoughts.

The shark here is important… any guesses? 👀

# Chapter 67: SoM - Dove

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Luke only dared to breathe when Abigail's house came into view.

The marble walls veined with ivy eased something in his chest, and at the entrance, waiting like a sentinel, sat the wolf. Riri's ears flicked as the approached, but he didn't rise; he only followed them with those piercing gray eyes as Luke trailed behind Abigail.

*Percy's eyes had remained green too.*

Luke looked away. The memory of that transformation was still fresh behind his eyelids, and he didn't want to imagine whether it had been the same with Ryan.

The groan of the door grated against his ears, shrieking like something half-alive, as if a ghost had lodged itself in the hinges during their brief absence. Luke cast a sideways glance at Abigail. Her eyes were vacant, dreamy, lost in some haze—bewitched, maybe.

His mouth tightened.

S*he* was the one who looked possessed.

A brush of fur at his side told him that Ryan had shifted, silent in a way no wolf should be. Or maybe Luke was simply too unnerved to notice. Still, he let himself take comfort in the warmth, allowing his hand to sink into the fur. No matter how hard his grip, Ryan didn't snap at him.

For a moment, Luke could almost believe Riri was being kind. But the thought curdled quickly. Ryan had been a wolf for so long, how could Luke be so sure the guy he knew was still in there?

With a weary sigh, he padded into the house, trailing a step behind Abigail, his brow furrowed as he watched her.

"Abigail," he began, once they reached the living room.

He hadn't noticed it much when he first arrived, but now he studied it, his gaze wandering in time with his sister's low mutters. The room was crowded with curious things, cluttered with what Luke guessed was the haul of Abigail's life on the streets—trinkets gathered and hoarded, now mingled with the newer tools she studied with.

Herbs and plants sprawled everywhere: hanging from the ceiling, creeping along the walls, sprouting from pots scattered across the floor. Abigail paced through them without ever misstepping. Jars lined every side table, some stuffed with flowers, others filled with unnameable, gooey substances. A few even seemed to hold eyes.

Luke glanced away quickly.

His sister halted mid-step. She blinked slowly, her gaze drifting from jar to jar, then to the half-buried sofa beneath a tangle of clothes.

She seemed to be returning to herself.

Or perhaps she was simply trying to remember where she was.

Suddenly, her face shifted. Confusion dissolved into something sharper: anger. Yet behind the scowl, Luke still caught the faint trace of fear, betrayed by the jittery, animal flicker in her eyes.

"Abigail," he repeated. His voice was firm, but his movements weren't. He approached with care, as though *she* were the dangerous, snarling beast—not Ryan, who had sat down to watch with placid blinks, like a man at a zoo exhibit.

The fact Abigail hadn't even noticed Riri in the house—

That was a bad sign.

"Do you remember what happened?" Luke asked, stepping in front of her, trying to catch her gaze.

But her eyes never settled, darting as though she saw hunters moving in the shadows.

"I—I do," Abigail snapped, reflexive. Her hand flew to her mouth, eyes wide. *Disoriented*, Luke thought. "We were going to the Mistress' house. For lessons."

Her scowl hardened. Her gaze slid sideways, then locked on him, as sharp as a dulled blade.

"What are we waiting for? You whined so much, and now you're wasting time?"

Luke's stomach dropped.

"Abigail…" His voice softened. He moved carefully, telegraphing every step until his hands rested on her arms. He gave a single squeeze, grounding her. "We already *went* there."

She stopped.

Stared at him.

Silent. Just for a second.

Then she bolted.

She wrenched free with a violent shove, nearly toplling him. Only his grip on a nearby table kept him upright, fingers clinging as if to save his life. Her footsteps thundered across the floor, and before he could recover, she flung open a door so hard it nearly tore off its hinges.

*Thud!*

Luke flinched, shoulders jerking instinctively. His hands slipped from the wood, dragging across the smooth surface as he straightened.

A sigh left his mouth, unbidden.

"What a shitty situation…" he muttered, pressing his fingertips to his temples as if they could hold back the swarm of panic crawling under his skin.

*Clack, clack, clack.* The scrape of claws against the floor snapped his attention around.

Ryan's nose twiched, ears pricked, eyes locked on the room Abigail had just entered. With a low huff of canine disdain, his lips peeled back just enough to bare one huge, sharp fang.

*Idiot.*

The word echoed in Luke’s head, clear and sharp, like a ball hurled into a canyon.

He almost laughed, biting his lip to hold it back. Hysteria pressed tight behind his ribs, and his mind clung to one constant: Ryan was still the same pompous asshole, the one who lived to get under Luke's skin, whose influence lingered over Annabeth even now, to Luke's eternal consternation.

"You're such an asshole, Ryan," he muttered, voice soft, lips tilting despite himself.

Ryan glanced at him but didn't bother to answer, lowering his head to his paws. But Luke noticed the faint thump of his tail—twice—before it stilled.

Like this, quiet and bored, a prince lounging in a fursuit, it was hard to picture him as the beast everyone claimed he was.

Luke studied the once-man with a furrowed brow. Why were the girls so wary of him? The stories they told—ripping people apart, snarling at everyone—seemed so strange. Outright aggression had never been Ryan's style.

Fists had always been more of a Peter’s thing.

Ryan was the guy who would cause an apocalypse, quietly, from behind the scenes—

"Something's not right, not right, *not right,*" Abigail mumbled on repeat as she clattered back into the room. Both hands cradled something as if it were glass, small enough to hide inside her fists.

Her fingers were white, knuckles taut, veins pulsing quick as a rabbit's heart as she passed him. She didn’t even glance his way.

Instead, she went straight for the dingy little chair crammed into the far corner, pressed up against a table and shelves cluttered with odd things: carved ceremonial knives, a haphazard pile of crystals, papers pinned to the walls, notes scrawled so messily he couldn't make sense of them. Herbs lay scattered across the surface. Mint, mostly. But something stronger, bitter, too.

"Not right," Abigail muttered, tremors running through her as she tore a page off the wall and scanned it with frantic eyes.

He wanted to speak, to explain, to calm her. It had been frightening, nightmare stuff, to have your memories ripped away. Luke knew that fear. But he'd been lucky—twice. And both times because of Mercury.

"Sister, I can explain—"

She didn't answer. Maybe didn't even hear. Her hand jerked, sharp as a puppet's tug, and whatever she held slipped to the floor. The clatter was faint, but deafening in the silence.

*Small*, Luke's mind supllied. His eyes tracked the little shapes as they rolled. *Pebbles*, came the next thought. He blinked hard, shot a glance at Ryan. The wolf sat aloof, though one ear twitched in their direction.

Just little rocks.

Yet Abigail stared as if the stones spelled something only she could read. Her eyes were wide and unblinking, and she didn't even seem to breathe. One finger traced along the floor, following the exact shape the pebbles had settled into—a shape that meant nothing to Luke, though clearly did to her.

Slowly, he crouched beside her, leaning closer to study them. Scattered, yes, with wide gaps between clusters, like whole pieces were missing. And yet… some of the pebbles angled inward, almost pointing at a single stone that sat nearer the center than the rest.

It was nonsense. Just rocks. Luke frowned, but when he risked a glance at his sister, she had gone pale, sucking in a breath as though something had struck straight through her chest.

Whatever she'd seen in the mess of stones seemed to pull her back into herself. Her voice was thin and distant when she spoke next, but also strangely firm.

“…What happened, Luke?” Abigail asked, still staring at the spread. She began gathering the stones, her hand trembling.

Unconsciously, Luke's hand drifted to the sash at his waist.

“We… went to the Mistress’ house,” he said slowly. “Because Percy is there. And you told me we'd pose as sisters, going in for a lesson.”

Abigail nodded, rolling the stones between her fingers. The tremor eased, and a flicker of recognition glimmered in her eyes. “I remember that.”

“We got in easily,” Luke continued, tugging at the fabric of his sash. “She offered to teach—you, not me—but she let me stay to observe. She…”

His voice caught.

Abigail's hand shot out, closing over his. She didn't look at him, her gaze still fixed on the stones in her other hand. Luke squeezed back and forced himself on.

“She already had Percy there, said he was the perfect test. She taught you to turn people into beasts. She promised there was a reversal potion, if it went wrong. But with your potion… she said it was good."

Abigail's eyes lifted slowly. "Good? What about the reversal potion?"

Luke drew in a shaky breath. “She—she told us it wasn’t needed." His voice turned wet, frantic. "She put Percy into that tank in her office, and… and a shark appeared."

He met her gaze, haunted.

"It almost ate the kid, Abigail. Percy's stuck there, with it. No way out. And it's my fault."

"Don't say that," she snapped immediately, tossing the pebbles to the ground again. She didn't look at them this time. Her gaze locked on Luke, intense, her strange eyes narrowing as she repeated, more forcefully, "Don't say that, Luke. It wasn't your fault."

She clicked her tongue, jaw tight, before turning her gaze aside.

"None of this is in our control. Maybe it's fate or… I don't know. But what I *do* know—even if I can't remember—is that you tried your best. You did everything you could to help the brat." She stooped to pluck up one pebble. "But we are mortals, Luke, and the Mistress is a goddess. There's only so much we can do."

Luke sniffled, covering his mouth with one hand. He felt raw, too vulnerable, until a hot flare of anger broke loose before he could stop it.

"Don't say it's fate. Fate already took Aubrey from us."

Abigail froze. Her fingers flexed around the stone, then loosened. She let it fall, watching it settle near the others. Her eyes went blank, her head bowed.

"…I know. I felt her die."

Her breath shuddered. Her brow furrowed as she studied the pattern the stones made, confusion creeping across her features. Then, abruptly, she gathered them up and scattered them again.

Luke didn't care about her strange hobbies.

“And Percy is a *fish* now," he said, voice cracking. “A *fish."*

The clicking of claws filled the air. Like a shadow, Ryan padded forward until he loomed beside Luke. The wolf was massive—taller than Luke hunched on the floor. Blinking hard, Luke risked a glance upward, puzzled.

But Ryan wasn't looking at Luke. His gray eyes were fixed on Abigail, teeth bared in a silent snarl, tongue flicking across his nose.

It was terrifying.

Abigail lowered her hands, painfully slow, until they rested on the ground. She shifted, planting her feet flat—ready to bolt if Ryan so much as breathed wrong.

A low rumble rose in the wolf's chest.

Abigail rose. Ryan tensed. Before Luke could think, his fingers dug into the thick fur of Ryan's neck, gripping hard.

The wolf made a guttural sound, snapping at the air—a warning nip, close enough to make Luke recoil before his fingers were torn away.

With his heart in his throat, he stared at Ryan, clutching his hand close to his chest. The wolf shook his head with a low growl and began to circle, muscles taut with barely contained agitation.

For a moment, neither Luke nor Abigail moved.

Then—

Ryan let out a huff, irritated, and slunk back to his corner. Relief crashed over Luke—so strong it nearly knocked him sideways—and he thought he saw Abigail relax as well.

"That mutt shouldn't even be inside. Dogs belong in the yard," she muttered with a scowl. But her shoulders stayed rigid, betraying her unease.

This time, Luke couldn't bring himself to defend Ryan. He looked down at his hand, a tight knot rising in his throat. When he glanced over his shoulder, Ryan was curling into a ball in the corner, tail thumping in agitation.

Luke shifted, turning his torso slightly.

He didn't want his back to Ryan. Not now.

"Look." Abigail's voice cut the air. She still stared at the wolf with open distrust, but when Ryan didn't move, she flicked her gaze toward Luke. "What happened to the kid is sad, I get that. But that's not the kind of thing the Mistress would…" Her throat worked, her face tightening for a brief moment. "…memory-wipe for. Transforming a man for the first time is a high honor, and she—of all people—would want the witch in question to claim it as a point of pride."

Luke tapped his fingers against his thighs. "That is inhumane," he whispered, bile rising in his throat.

Percy, trapped in a tank with a shark that had almost eaten him. A shark that had once been a man, too. And Ryan—unpredictable, calm one moment, baring his teeth the next. Luke's

stomach twisted.

He bit the inside of his cheek.

"It is," Abigail admitted flatly. She pointed first at Ryan, then at Luke. "But think: what reason would the Mistress have to memory-wipe…" She broke off, realization dawning. "You didn't have your memories wiped."

"I ate the chocolate," Luke said simply.

"Ah." Her face twisted. "That foreign god's Valentine's Day offering to you."

"It's not—"

Abigail waved him off. "Whatever. What happened after? Something important must have happened for the Mistress to erase it—something she doesn't want spreading."

Luke frowned, licking his lips before speaking slowly. He still didn't wuite understand what Circe had done.

“Another witch came, warning the Mistress about boats. And something about envoys. After that, the Mistress came to us and did something with her aura—” he gestured vaguely “—and told us to go home.”

He clenched his hands together, fidgeting.

“You went blank-eyed for a while, Abigail. Like you weren’t there.”

Abigail closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose.

“Ships…”

She was focusing on the wrong thing.

“I get that it’s concerning,” Luke said, urgency tightening his voice. “But I have a *quest* to get back to, Abigail. And I need to rescue Percy. I need your help."

Abigail tapped her chin, lips pursed.

“Ships. Memory wipe…” Her eyes lit up. She snapped her fingers. "An invasion!”

Luke almost shook her. *What the hell was she talking about?*

“Abigail—”

“I heard you,” she cut in, waving a hand like she was swatting off a fly. “But hear me out. If there’s an invasion coming, and the Mistress is hiding it from us, doesn’t that increase our chances of sneaking in and stealing the potion?" She shrugged. "Potion and brat in one swoop."

Her eyes locked on his.

“The chaos could work in our favor.”

Luke blinked, then frowned, his mind racing. "But what about after? Do you know any escape routes?"

“Didn’t you send your other brat—”

Ryan leapt to his paws and lunged for the door, cutting her off.

“No! You *mutt!*” Abigail yelped, scrambling after him. She snatched up a broom, brandishing it like a weapon, or maybe just to keep from getting too close to the massive wolf. “No attacking anyone! S*hoo!* No one can know you’re in my house—!”

The door opened before Abigail could say another word.

And there she was: Clarisse herself, as if the gods had summoned her in the moment they most needed her. Relief loosened something tight in Luke's chest at the sight of her in one piece.

His eyes scanned her, brows shooting up in disbelief.

She wore a chiton like his, long to her feet, arms bare. Her hair was tied back in a bun, a delicate tiara pinning stray strands from her face. Gold dust shimmered around her eyes, making the red of her irises gleam like fresh blood.

*Hylla.* The culprit's name rose immediately. Of course she’d done a makeover on Clarisse. She probably loved it too, if only because Clarisse must have fought tooth and nail.

But Luke's attention didn't linger on the unusual sight, because something even stranger caught his gaze.

In Clarisse’s hands—cradled carefully between ringed fingers as though it were an artifact—was a dove.

*The* dove.

The same one Luke had seen when he first landed on the island. The one that had brought him to the clothes he was wearing now. The one that had disappeared without warning.

And now, on its tiny beak, dangled a piece of paper, old and wrinkled, the same one he had traced more than once.

Luke’s breath caught.

“Is that…?” he asked, voice barely above a whisper.

The dove cocked its head and let out a coo that sounded a little too disdainful to Luke's ears, fluffing its feathers and twisting its neck to fix Clarisse with a stare.

She seemed to get the silent message. Her posture shrank, more cowed than Luke had ever seen her. The only other time she hadn't acted like a mini-boar, always thirsting for a fight, was during that Ares encounter.

Lord, that felt like a lifetime ago.

"Our ship is in the peripheries, intact," Clarisse said at last. Her face twisted into a scowl. "I haven't been able to reach the dock to check for myself, because that girl was dogging my heels the whole time, the little… She made scouting harder than it should've been." She schooled her expression. "From what I saw, routes out are few and far between. The only real way is by ship, and—"

"Each dock is guarded," Abigail interrupted, rising like an apparition. She cast an unreadable glance at the dove in Clarisse's arms, her grip on the broom tightening.

Clarisse startled, shooting Abigail a wide-eyed look that held equal defiance and doubt. Her gaze darted to Luke, and only relaxed when he gave a faint nod.

"But," Abigal went on, "if your ship is nearby, there's a better chance. At last we won't have to steal one. The problem will be sneaking the two men in, but…" She tilted her head, studying Clarisse. "You, brat. Did you hear anything about ships on the coast?"

"Ships?" Clarisse frowned, baffled.

She clearly had no idea what Abigail was talking about. Either the ships were far away, or—more likely, Luke realized—the information was being kept to a select few. Which, considering what Circe had just done…

Luke suppressed a shiver.

"Figures you wouldn't know." Abigail sighed, then turned with the broom still in her hand—half drama queen, half witch Cinderella. "Worth a try."

Luke glanced at her, then back at Clarisse's confused frown. Clearly, he needed to explain—Abigail wasn't going to be any help here.

As always.

Luke always had to do things himself.

"We were at the Mistress' house," he began, his mouth thinning. "There was talk about ships circling the island. She didn't like that we overheard and erased—or tried to—our memories. Abigail…" He hesistated, then exhaled, tired. "Well, she thinks we can use this to save Percy. And… you know." Luke pointed. "The wolf."

Clarisse followed his finger. Her face twisted. "Why? We have limited resources, and this is a risk to our quest, and…" She looked down at her feet. "To the group, and Percy, and…" She wet her lips. "We already faced a disaster and got separated," she finished weakly.

*She's guilty*, Luke noted. *And trying to correct her mistakes in the only way she knows how.*

But this was Ryan.

He rubbed his jaw. "That's right. But he's not just anyone."

"What do you mean—ah!"

Ryan had moved almost like he'd teleported, suddenly standing beside her, nose twitching, eyes narrowed. Luke tensed—then relaxed, realizing the wolf was only trying to place her. *Maybe he remembers her,* Luke thought, tilting his head. The fact that he hadn't attacked probably meant something.

*Maybe*.

"This guy is Ryan. You remember him, don't you? Annabeth's older brother?"

"That's… that's him? He was here all this time?" The dove in Clarisse's hands batted its wings, but she didn't seem to notice. "We have to tell Annabeth."

"We'll tell her when we get back to the ship—if she's even there," Luke said, his voice tired. The Odyssey's torn page here probably meant Annabeth was there… but it could as easily mean her backpack had been left behind in the cabin.

He closed his eyes, pressing against the migraine clawing at his skull.

Lord, he just wanted to lie down and exist for a few minutes. The past few days had been so hectic he doubted he'd recover anytime soon.

"Skreee!"

Luke flinched, Clarisse nearly dropped the dove off but caught herself, Ryan covered his ears with his paws, and Abigail fumbled with the broom before saving it with a muttered, "Holy shit, my eardrums—"

"Yes, Lady, I'm sorry, please forgive us for this slight," Clarisse blurted, her head to the dove. If it hadn't been so bizarre—and if Luke didn't already know the bird was strange as Olympus itself, and probably not a bird at all—he might have laughed at the sight of her bowing to it.

The dove gave what sounded like a disdainful sniff, cast Clarisse a glance, then focused on Abigail. With a beat of wings, it launched into the air, circling her once, twice, before settling on her shoulder. Abigail froze, eyes darting in confusion, while the dove let out an indignant coo and gave a sharp peck to her head.

"Ouch—!" Abigail hissed, flinching back.

Then, just as abruptly, the bird fluttered back to Clarisse's hands.

"What the hell," Abigail muttered, massaging her temple.

But Luke wasn't paying attention to her. His eyes were fixed on the dove as it tapped its beak against the paper—once, then again—before turning to look at him.

The gesture tugged at something in his head, like a signal he wanted to believe in, thought he wasn't sure it was true—even if he yearned for it.

"Annabeth is on the ship," the words burst from him before he could think, his hands already reaching to grab the wrinkled paper.

His eyes scanned the text. It was the passage of Odysseus winning Circe's good graces and it made him smile. Annabeth is safe, Luke though, almost giddy. Annabeth was safe. Relatively speaking. He hoped Dean and Tyson were there with her. They probably were; they hadn't fought Scylla, and they were monsters—their scents shouldn't have drawn her in. If the ship hadn't sunk, they were probably fine.

Or so Luke hoped.

Clarisse let out a sigh, then briefly stiffened as Ryan padded over. The wolf's eyes locked on the paper in Luke's hands. He leaned close, sniffing intently.

Luke noticed his tail wag with a faint smile.

"Annabeth is safe," Luke said at last, his voice firmer, as if he'd finally found ground beneath his feet. "So now we have to get to Percy. He's in a tank with a shark inside Circe's office. We," he gestured to Abigail, "have determined that reversal potions exist, but we don't yet know where inside that house they're kept. We'll need at least two. One for Percy, and one for —"

Everyone's eyes turned to Ryan, sitting on his haunches, still nosing the paper in Luke's grip.

"…him," Luke finished tiredly.

“Yeah, we save the fish brat and the wolf asshole,” Abigail said dryly, shaking her head as she toyed with the pebbles in her palm. “The ship distraction plan’s good enough…” Her gaze flicked to the dove, puzzled. “But where did that thing come from?”

“Show some respect,” Clarisse snapped. “The dove is the sacred animal of Genetellys.”

Abigail arched a brow. “Ah. A Cabin Five brat. I should’ve known.”

“The plan,” Luke cut in, exasperation sharpening his voice. “We *need* a plan, girls.”

“We already have one, I just said—”

“An escape plan,” Luke clarified, cutting her off.

“That was the brat’s job, and she said it was by ship, and the dove—”

“The Lady,” Clarisse corrected, firm.

“The Lady,” Abigail echoed without missing a beat, “proved your ship’s nearby.”

“But we still have to hide until we reach it,” Luke shot back.

“And the Mistress will be busy, lil’ bro,” Abigail countered. “The other girls will be gawking. I’m sure we can sneak through the greenery—don’t you see all the trees around?”

“The Lady can guide the ship to us,” Clarisse added. “If she wishes it, of course.”

At that moment, the dove decided to rejoin the conversation. It fluttered around their heads before perching daintily on the windowsill. Regal as a queen, it began hopping side to side—slowly, deliberately, like it thought they were idiots—before beating its wings once.

Luke exchanged a puzzled glance with Abigail.

Clarisse translated, her voice soft. “The Lady has blessed us. She will guide the ship, keep watch, warn us of what’s coming… and she—”

The dove lifted one wing and pointed toward the far-off docks.

“She says the envoy has already arrived.”

Chapter End Notes

So… Abigail’s been mind-wiped and the dove is back. Things are happening 👀

Will they save Percy before he’s made into shark chow? We’ll see…

In any case, thank you all for reading! ❤️

# Chapter 68: SoM - Shark

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Don't act so obvious, you little shit."

Abigail's voice threaded through the air, muttered under her breath, her face arranged in something between neutral and mildly annoyed.

Luke didn't even fault her—she wasn't exactly wrong. He was jumpy, skittish as a colt fresh from its mother, ready to bold at the first sign of trouble.

Which, of course, only made him look guilty.

“I'm trying!” he whispered back, no heat in his tone. His eyes flicked sideways yet again, wondering for the umpteenth time if the witches—so far content to ignore them and their strangeness—would stay that way if they knew what he and Abigail were planning.

The women crowded the streets in clusters, hissing curses as Abigail shoved past them with a sneer. Luke trailed after her, offering apologetic smiles that probably only made him look constipated, judging by the disgusted glares thrown his way.

They whispered as thought their Mistress' choice to receive a *guest* in person was some kind of circus show.

"The Mistress left," one said.

"Didn't you hear? We'll receive visitors!" another answered.

But not all the whispers were so harmless. A few spoke of Circe's siblings. Others muttered of the Three-Formed and her pupils, voices edged with suspicion. The older—or perhaps simply wiser—witches suspected it was no visit at all.

Luke couldn't help but wonder. Who were these visitors, that Circe would go so far as to erase their memories? Abigail whispered of invasion, and perhaps it was…

He glanced toward the dock at the bottom of the marble stairs. Women lined the path on either side, whispering, but through the gaps he still caught side of the lone ship.

It was a handsome vessel, its prow carved with the figure of a man bound to the mast. In one hand he held fire, leaning forward as if offering it. His face was pained yet determined, as though the burden was worth the sacrifice.

From this distance, Luke couldn't make out the ship's name.

A flash—the paper the dove had brought him flickered in his mind. He blinked, and the curiosity gnawing at him evaporated, replaced by the sharper bite of concern. His ship. The

brats. That was what mattered.

Circe's worries weren't his. Let the "visitors" do whatever they wanted here; it wasn't his business.

“Fix your face, *sister*. You look like a squirrel in a trap—it makes anyone who sees you want to deck you," Abigail's muttered hiss cut back through his thoughts.

Abigail marched down the street toward the mansion at the far end, all purpose and determination—or at least the show of it. Luke wasn't sure she had any more confidence than he did about what they were about to try.

But she was trying to project it.

Fake it til you make it, maybe.

She picked up her pace, lifting her chin, fingers fussing with the short braids that looped from her temples to the back of her head. She smoothed them flat, tucking stray waves behind her ears, but loose wisps still sprang free, making her look more frazzled than fierce.

The women—fewer now the farther they got from the dock, thank the Lord for small mercies—parted when Abigail came near. They threw wary looks, sharp as arrows, mixed with mutters of "*her again*," "*no manners*," and one clear, uncreative "*bitch*." Still, their necks craned toward the horizon, too busy gawking and gossiping to pay much notice to either of them.

Abigail looked ready to swing, but Luke pushed her forward with a firm hand between her shoulder blades.

"What about Clarisse? Did you really have to send her off to gallivant around in this death trap?" he asked, keeping one hand on his sister's arm as though it were a leash. He shot her a look of disapproval. "She's alone now."

“The brat has no reason to be near the Mistress' house, Luke. Try using your brain." Abigail's glare cut sideways.

“Neither do we," Luke shot back, his voice thick with judgment. "The lesson ended, she said she was happy with your progress, and now we're going back to her house without being called? While she's out, mind you. That's not suspicious to you?"

“We're actual magical practitioners, Lulu. You only by a technicality, but good enough, I suppose. Plus, you're my so-called sister. That kid? She's a newbie with no ties to me. If people saw her tagging along without even one 'Magic for Dummies' lesson under her belt—not that she'd be good at it, war boar that she is—eyebrows would go up. More attention. Less chance for us to do what we're doing now: sneaking around in plain sight."

"I'm also a newbie, Abigail."

"You had a lesson—in front of half the coven—so everyone knows your face. That trick you pulled made you look talented, too. That's all the cover you need. Clarisse hasn't even had

that yet."

She scoffed.

"That little battlebrat's more useful carving out an escape route and standing guard. Besides, she's not alone. With that wolf at her side and the…" she pulled a face, "the dove, she's more than equipped to handle herself. Best she sees what's happening out there while we focus on getting her little boyfriend out of that tank."

Percy and Clarisse as a couple. Lord have mercy.

Luke had a flash of the two stubborn brats together, and it was an unholy image. Not that picturing Percy and Annabeth was any better. Annabeth was… well, she was too young for that kind of thing, no matter that she was older than Percy. Everyone knew boys stayed stupid for a long time; you only had to look at Luke's father to know that.

Though Hermes was a god, so perhaps he'd just gotten stuck somewhere in the middle and never gotten out.

No. Too disturbing. Luke shoved the thought away.

“Fine. Let's suppose she keeps an eye on the Mistress and maps us a way out—then what?” He side-eyed Abigail. “We get the kid, twiddle our thumbs, and hope for the best?”

Abigail huffed loud enough to scatter a few birds from a nearby roof.

“We try to find the reversal potion in that big-ass house without alerting the Mistress. We'll have to split up for it. When we manage to un-fish the brat, we sneak out the back." She gestured sharply with her hands. "Mistress' place is built like one of those great Greek houses, y'know? Courtyard in the middle, fancy as hell, little service doors at the back... We can slip out through one of those. Since she lives out by the edge near the forest, we can sneak out if we stay smart and out of sight."

Her mouth pinched. "If shit hits the fan, there's always shadow-travel. But… I'm not the only one here who knows it. It's easier for me, sure, but it's magic. The more experienced witches know it too, and we don't want them after us."

“True," Luke conceded. "But since everyone's busy with the whole envoy thing, I think the more experienced witches will be at her beck and call in case anything happens." He shrugged. "Like a tense diplomatic meeting or something."

“Yeah, but who says all of them will be there? Some might've been sent ahead before the Mistress brings the guests here."

Abigail's tone had gone serious as they finally stopped before Circe's house.

“…You can't mean she's coming here." Luke's voice went thin. Then, more hysterical, he whipped his head toward Abigail in disbelief. "You said this would be a chance to get Percy out!"

“And it is, lil bro,” Abigail said, her tone leaving no room for argument. "She's not here now because she's still at the dock."

Her hand found the door handle. She eased it open, glancing back over her shoulder with one purple-blue eye.

“We just have to be faster than her.”

“And lucky,” Luke muttered, but he followed when Abigail stepped inside.

Inside, the house felt eerier somehow. Even without Circe within its walls, the mansion carried her—in everything. In the herbs that crowded every surface, in the wide, elegant columns circling the courtyard, and, most damning of all, in the carvings etched into the marble.

Luke eyed them warily as he followed Abigail, his steps slower, the echo of their feet sounding far too loud in his ears. He couldn't tell whether those runes allowed Circe to monitor her home of it they were just decoration. Maybe she was simply that confident. Maybe this was simply an exception.

Either way, no alarm went off. *Thank the Lord.*

His gaze caught on a carving of a man mid-transformation—the same one he'd seen earlier—and, on cue, his stomach turned. The image looped back to Percy's forced change, and Luke swallowed down the bile rising in his throat.

He hoped Circe couldn't see them.

Then, correcting himself: he hoped she wouldn't *think* anyone would be bold enough to invade her mansion.

If only that arrogance could buy them enough time to save Percy.

With a deep breath, he walked on, eyes flicking over the runes. The symbols shimmered faintly along the walls, throwing pale light that glittered over marble and shadow. Almost as if they were watching them—half-alive things with a will of their own. But Circe herself didn't appear with that terrifying smile to ask what the hell they were doing there.

Then Abigail halted. Her hand shot up, stopping him mid-step.

"Abigail—?"

She silenced him with a glare, one finger pressed to her lips. Then she gestured to her ears and mimed zipping her mouth shut.

Luke understood instantly. He held his breath, trying to listen. His ears strained, prickling like an animal hiding from a predator. The faint rustle of leaves outside twisted into a sound that could have been wailing—and beneath it, something else: faint but rhythmic, and drawing closer.

"Steps," he whispered, whipping his head toward her.

"Yes." Abigail's face had gone grim. "This complicates things."

Wasn't that the understatement of the century.

"What do we do now?" Luke's fingers twisted in the sash at his waist, anxiety spiking so hard he thought he might actually pass out. Then the image of himself fainting dead away while witches leaned over him with malicious looks made the urge vanish very—*very*—quickly.

Abigail opened her mouth to reply—

"I told you I heard voice," a prim voice interrupted.

Luke froze. The voice was familiar—irritatingly so—but his panicked mind struggled to place it.

His sister, in contrast, had no such trouble.

"Olenoe," Abigail hissed, recognition and disgust flashing across her face. "Just my luck."

Luke froze, as if stillness could somehow make him invisible.

Beside him, Abigail muttered in increasingly agitated bursts. Even through the numb haze of panic, he caught fragments, "If I try to shadow-travel, that bitch will feel it… We could sneak until we're out of range…" and, in a sharp whisper edged with anxious fury, "Fuck! Why did Luke have to throw my life into disarray?"

Then even her voice faded, drowned by the sound of footsteps and faint conversation—quiet, but to Luke as loud as his own heartbeat thundering in his ears.

A drumbeat of retreat.

"Fuck…" Abigail breathed beside him, hand clamped over her mouth, eyes wide and wild. She looked as lost as he felt, though a touch more decisive. She whipped her head toward him, lips curling.

"Run! We have to run—"

The nervous energy inside him—panic, dread, every thought he'd been drowning in—erupted all at once. Abigail's mouth snapped shut with an audible click. Luke held his breath.

Around the corner, two women appeared, side by side, strutting through Circe's halls mid-conversation, oblivious to the two intruders standing frozen in the corridor.

Luke's breath stuttered as his hand shot out, grabbing Abigail's whip-quick. Her palm was just like his, he noticed distantly, cold and clammy, as if she were just as terrified.

She stayed silent. Her eyes tracked the two witches, shoulders taut, her grip on his hand tightening by degrees, ready to yank him back at the first flicker of recognition.

The women stepped closer.

Luke caught the scent of perfume—roses, sweet and delicate—and the soft rush of air as they passed.

But they didn't see them.

The breath he released came out all at once, so heavy with relief that it left him hollow, like a balloon popped from the inside.

"Your mystery ability saved us," Abigail said, shoulders hunched, one hand braced against the wall as she slumped against it. Her breathing was quick, her face a shade too pale, but her eyes were fixed on the air like she could see something invisible dancing there.

Luke wet his lips. "I don't know what I did."

Her gaze slid from the air to him. "Figure it out, baby brother. It might be our ticket to salvation."

She hesitated, pressing her fist to her mouth in thought. "And… it might help the brat too—"

"How?" Luke cut in.

"It's just an idea." Abigail shook her head, still looking puzzled. "Might be wrong. Might even makes things worse for us, for all I know."

"Anything to help is better than nothing at all, Abigail." Luke's expression darkened. "Percy needs all the help he can get."

She breathed in deep, rubbed her temples, then let her hands fall. "You know Dad's a god of many things, right?" She waited for his hesitant nod before continuing. "One of those things is boundaries—and liminality. What I do is close: I travel the shadow-paths between Underworld and mortal world and so on. But it isn't the same."

She pointed a finger at his face.

"Think about what happened. They were this close, and they didn't see us. Why?" She gestured at the air around him. "Mist covered us, sure, but there's something else. From what I've studied this past year, I'd tentatively call it our half-god side acting up."

"So… you're saying I have that?" Luke asked, brows knit.

Abigail shrugged. "I'm saying it's possible. And if it is true… we might be able to get the brat out of the tank. The Mistress placed him in there with magic—there's no physical key to magically open it up for us."

Luke went still. He'd been so focused on Percy-as-a-fish that he hadn't properly thought about the *tank*—a glass prison with a shark swirling in it.

The image made his fingers fidget in the sash.

"So how do I do that?"

Abigail studied him for a long second. A strange look crossed her face before she hid it behind her usual snark. "You're still a newbie. Best you do right now is don't pass out." She sighed. "Let me try shadow-travel first. If I can get close enough to pluck him, I'll pull him out and we'll un-fish him. If that fails… then we see what your liminal trick actually does."

"Abigail," Luke said again, slowly. "The tank's full of water. Shadows don't behave the same there."

Her face told him she knew her plan was a reach. He could see the same doubt flicker there that had crossed his own mind, but before she could speak, before she could talk him down, Luke cut her off.

He had to try. Percy needed him.

"How do I do it?"

Abigail exhaled—long and weary, the sound of someone deeply done with her brother and the world at large.

"You'll be the end of me," she muttered.

Luke didn't move.

She huffed, throwing up a hand. "Fine. Liminality's a state between two things, but it's neither. What you did earlier made us both present and not, twisted those witches' perception so they couldn't see us. If we apply that logic to the tank…" she gestured vaguely, "…you could—potentially—make the glass both there and not. Inside and outside blurred together. Bam. Kid out."

Luke chewed on that thought. It made sense. It could even help—maybe it was the only way to get Percy out. But… but it would solve only one problem.

The cure. They *had* to find it. And fast.

"Then I'll do that after we get the reversal potion. This is the best chance we have to actually save Percy; I won't let it pass." Luke's voice hardened with determination.

He didn't say the rest aloud: that failure wasn't an option.

Abigail rolled her eyes. "Be stubborn—see where that gets you. One moment you're trying a cool trick, feeling like hot shit; the next, you're puking so hard you'll think you'll cough your guts out. Trust me. I know."

He closed his eyes and breathed in raggedly, ignoring her.

*Focus*, he told himself. *The potion. Percy. That's what matters now.*

When he opened his eyes, Abigail was staring at him, her mouth twisted into a frown she wiped away almost immediately. He could see her weighing something—the argument or him—and deciding it wasn't worth the fight. For a moment he thought she would deny him, stop him, but she only turned and marched to the edge of the corridor, peering down the hall.

“You're right," she said at last, voice clipped. "We need the potion before we do anything, and we're short on time, so we split up."

Abigail didn't look at him as she checked a side passage.

"I'll take this corridor, you take that one." She tapped her fingers on her thigh in a steady rhythm, measuring. "If we have the potion, great. If not, meet me in the Mistress' office in fifteen. Then we'll get the brat out, at least to keep him from becoming shark chow."

All of sudden, she whipped her head around and locked eyes with him.

"Don't try that liminality shit without me near, okay?"

For a long second, they stared each other down, neither willing to yield. Then, with a heavy sigh, Luke muttered, “Okay.”

Abigail exhaled like a weight had lifted off her shoulders. "Okay. Good. Don't get caught. Olenoe's actually skilled. But since we're splitting up, the chances are lower."

"I won't." He hesitated before leaving. “Be safe, Abigail.”

She snorted, but her eyes softened. “And you too, Luke. Try not to fuck this up too much, will you?”

“I'll try not to,” he mumbled, too unnerved to come up with anything equally as sharp.

She lingered for a moment longer before heading down the opposite corridor, her form growing smaller with each step. Luke watched her go, pausing every time the symbols on the walls pulsed and shimmered. The tense set of her shoulders told him how tightly she was holding herself together, then she shook her head once, squared up, and vanished through a door carved with all manner of beasts—lions and pigs most of all.

Luke stood there a moment too long, watching his sister disappear down the corridor, long enough to make himself want to hit something. He sighed, then clenched his jaw.

With an awkward, hesitant turn, he started down the corridor. Every sound made him flinch. He kept close to the wall, one hand gliding along it as if he could melt into the marble and vanish if the witches appeared again. A game of hide-and-seek twisted into something cruel.

The corridor looked the same as the rest of the house: elegant and eerie. Strange symbols crawled across the walls, carved into looping, deliberate patterns. Luke glanced at them once and looked away just as quickly.

It reminded him too much of what had happened to Percy. The bile rising with his guilt burned his throat—a feeling he hated more than anything. A flash of Percy's face flickered

behind his eyelids, and Luke forced it out.

He walked faster. And then he heard it.

His heart almost stopped.

"I do not need a break, as you call it," Olenoe's voice struck the silence like a guillotine, and with it went all of Luke's fragile calm.

"You really do. I don't think hearing voices is normal," another voice answered, dropping into a whisper. "I heard stress can really mess with your head. Maybe all those years of service have caught up to you…"

"Are you calling me old?!"

Panic seized him.

His eyes darted wildly, from the trays of herbs to the marble columns to the shimmering walls. There was nowhere to hide. His breath came too fast, and a light-headed buzz started behind his eyes.

*I can try to disappear again,* he thought, desperation thundering in his chest.

*Focus*, he told himself.

*Focus!*

Nothing happened. The footsteps and voices were coming closer.

"Lord, why isn't it working—" he whispered, biting his nails, the taste of fear and copper on his tongue. Cold sweat gathered at the back of his neck. Every hair on his body stood on end.

He was going to get caught.

*No!*

He clenched his hand into a fist, nails digging into his palm.

*Think. Come on, think.*

A shadow stretched across the marble floor, growing larger. His time to think vanished.

Luke did the only thing left: he ran.

"Someone's here!" Olenoe's voice cut through the air, and Luke heard the footsteps quicken behind him.

He could almost picture it: they'd burst into the corridor and see the newcomer, Abigail's "sister," sprinting through the Mistress' halls where she had no right to be. Then they'd catch him. Question him. Maybe Circe herself would appear at the end of it all—

He nearly missed the door. Barely open, slightly crooked, half-rotten at the frame. He caught sight of it at the last moment—thank the Lord. His panicked mind read it for what it was: shelter. A burrow to dive into, like a hunted rabbit desperate for earth.

The door creaked as he pushed it open, the sound slicing through the air and making Luke wince. He froze, glancing back down the corridor in alarm. The footsteps continued past, followed by the harsh breaths of people still running.

He didn't wait to see if they'd turn toward him. He slipped inside and shut the door, pressing his chest against it.

He stayed there, one ear pressed to the wood, shoulders tight, listening.

"You lost them," the other witch said, her voice muffled through the door.

"Be silent," Olenoe snapped, her tone sharp with embarrassment. "It might have been just the wind. Not a person. Who would dare enter the Mistress' house so boldly?"

"Yeah… just the wind."

Their footsteps receded.

Luke didn't relax until long after the sound of padded feet on marble faded completely. When he finally did, he slumped against the door, dragging in air like a man surfacing after nearly drowning.

"Cacete," he muttered under his breath, rubbing a hand over his face and pushing himself upright on shaky legs. He felt like a lamb that had barely escaped the wolf.

Only when his pulse had steadied did he turn to look at the room he'd thrown himself into.

It was bare—that was his first impression. None of the grandiosity of the rest of the house, just plain walls and an old wooden floor, strewn with faded rugs that smelled of mold. The air stung his eyes and burned his nose, strong enough to make him sneeze.

The "achoo!" echoed through the room like an accusation.

Luke rubbed his nose as he stepped farther in, moving carefully, his feet barely making a sound. He'd locked himself inside a prison without a key, he thought grimly, glancing up at the ceiling and narrowing his eyes at the narrow windows—just thin slits that let in pale light.

He circled the room slowly. Wood, dust, and—

Luke froze.

He blinked.

“It can't be true,” he whispered, moving toward the small stand in the corner. His steps were cautious, his eyes flicking between the shelf and the floor. For all he knew, there could be traps.

Painstakingly, he stepped closer, each movement deliberate, his weight spread carefully so he could spring back at the slightest hint of danger.

But when nothing happened after, his fear thinned, and he pressed on more confidently.

Time was scarce, after all.

The shelf was ancient, made of splintered wood, so ugly Luke half believed it might be as old as Circe herself.

Which meant *very* old.

And on top of it sat several vials. Their color stood in sharp contrast to the ones that had transformed Percy; instead of deep purple, these glowed a golden yellow, like sunflowers chasing the warmth of the sun.

He stopped himself just before touching one. *Traps*, his mind warned. Then a reminder. Inside could have been anything—any kind of potion, any kind of magic—but something in him whispered this was it. The reversal potion. The one they needed and couldn't get.

It *had* to be.

Why else would she hide it here, in a room so plain and forgotten? Maybe it looked abandoned precisely because Circe didn't want anyone snooping around.

And if she didn't…

Luke narrowed his eyes at the shelf, cataloguing the hairline cracks in the surface and the faint glints of the carved symbols on it he'd just only noticed. They could mean anything, from maintaining the right temperature to melting his hand the moment he touched a vial. An anti-thief measure. And for all his doubts, he had to admit: if it were him, he'd have done it.

He bit the inside of his own cheek, worrying the skin until he tasted blood. Sweat trickled down his temples.

Before he could think, he reached out and snatched one.

The runes flared to life all at once, flooding the bare room with light.

Luke lurched backward so fast the air seemed to whip around him. The next instant, he was pressed against the door, clutching the vial to his chest like a stolen treasure.

A strange sound—*shwiiiish*—echoed.

He froze. Waited.

Nothing happened.

He almost let out a sigh of relief but caught himself just in time. The glass rolled nervously between his fingers as he kept his eyes on the shelves, watching cautiously as the lights

dimmed one by one.

Maybe it hadn't sensed him. Maybe he'd just been fast enough. Or maybe it had already alerted someone, and knowing his luck, that someone would be Circe herself.

The thought alone made him move again. His movements were jerky with panic but tense with resolve.

*I need more*, Luke thought, shoving the vial into his sash and tightening it against his body. He couldn't afford to drop it, couldn't afford to lose even a drop of this liquid salvation.

*I need to take more,* he told himself, pulse hammering. *If something happens—God forbid—I could break one trying to escape. And Ryan needs one too.*

His hands moved before his fear could stop them. Just as before, he darted forward, scooping up a handful of potions in one quick motion, then backed away the instant the light flickered again.

Like a frozen lamb, he stood there, still, waiting for slaughter. But nothing happened. Again. No footsteps outside, no witches coming back this way, no Circe rushing in to see who was robbing her.

Minute by minute, he let himself breathe. Then, quickly and carefully, he tucked the vials away—three of them: two for Percy and Ryan, one as insurance. Only after that did he look back one last time and open the door.

Once outside, his body moved before his mind caught up, limbs rushing forward, nerves buzzing in his ears.

Now, I only have to get to Percy.

Luke veered right, his thoughts flickering like a malfunctioning bulb. His feet, though, already knew the path, carrying him on mindlessly.

He drew a deep breath, trying to steady himself. He had to show Percy a brave face. Luke was the adult. He had to stay in control, to calm the kid.

Percy must already be so terrified…

Luke's jaw clenched, then unclenched.

He glanced down, eyes darting to the potions, counting them again. One. Two. Three. The act soothed him, calmed the wild pulse in his chest just enough that he reached the massive door without drowning in panic.

Still, he swallowed dryly and lifted his gaze. Should he wait for Abigail? She'd said fifteen minutes, to meet her here.

Had fifteen minutes already passed? He couldn't tell; time had blurred between almost being caught and stealing the potions. He couldn't hear anything either. His sister wasn't here yet.

Has she been caught?

No. Abigail was too slippery. Too skilled.

And she's said *Circe's office.*

Luke shifted from foot to foot.

Then, with a deep breath, he pushed the door open, ignoring the frantic beat of his heart, a one-man band inside his ribs.

He froze again, scanning the room, eyes flicking over every corner, half-expecting Circe's ghost to appear, smiling that terrible smile and asking, "Why is dear Lúcia back so soon?"

A shiver ran through him. He swallowed hard and forced the image away.

He clutched the vials tighter and stepped deeper into the room, making a beeline for the tank. His gaze searched the water for any sign of Percy, his stomach sinking the longer he saw nothing.

*Had Percy been eaten—*

A flicker of movement in the dark water on the far side caught his eye.

Without thinking, Luke rushed forward, closing the distance in a few long strides until his nose was almost against the glass. His eyes were wide, unblinking, desperate not to miss a single detail.

Another flicker—then there he was.

Relief hit so hard his knees nearly buckled. He caught himself just in time, straightening before his stupidity made him drop the only solution they had.

His grip on the vials tightened, fingers digging into them as if to reassure himself they were still here.

"Percy," Luke called.

The fish didn't move, gliding close to the tank floor, tail flicking as he turned back toward the darker depths—cautious, like Percy was swimming laps near the ground so he could dart away at the first sign of danger.

A surge of irrational frustration filled Luke.

"Percy!" he called again, louder this time.

The fish jolted, floating a few centimeters upward before turning toward him. Luke would've called the expression startled, but fish always had those wide, shocked-looking eyes—it was hard to tell.

He placed a hand on the glass, then whispered, " I brought the cure, Percy." He knocked gently with his knuckles. "Stay close, I—"

He hesitated, words catching. Then shook his head and furrowed his brow in determination.

"I just need to get you out of there. Wait for me, and don't swim too far from where I can see you."

Percy bobbed up and down, as if in agreement, though it might've been only the waves moving him. Still, considering the brat hadn't drifted far from where he'd been, aside from a few lazy circles, Luke decided he was listening.

With a huff, he set the vials carefully on the ground. They clinked softly against the floor—too loud for comfort, but to Luke it sounded like victory.

Freedom.

So *close*.

He just had to do one last thing. Then they'd get to the ship. Then they'd get out of this hell.

"Now, what to do…" Luke murmured, resting a finger against his chin as he narrowed his eyes at the glass.

He placed both hands on it, knocked a few times. It was thick, too, *very* thick. Considering how much water it held, it had to be.

Luke's eyes roamed upward. The tank loomed over him, reaching all the way to the ceiling. He turned his head, trying to follow it. The thing took up nearly the entire wall, maybe the whole room. It wasn't lit for display like some aquarium; it was dark, opaque—the color of the ocean's floor.

He scowled.

"What should I do?" he muttered, looking down at his hands.

Percy was right there. All he had to do was figure it out. Abigail was still out there, and he didn't know how much time had passed. He couldn't waste any more. Not when the Mistress could return any second, probably with her best witches in tow. And that envoy… he didn't know what the meeting was for, but whatever it was, it couldn't be good.

*Liminality. That's what I have to do,* Luke thought, clenching his fists. He hesitated. *Abigail told me not to use it without her here. But she also said it might be the solution we needed.*

He bit his lip.

Then made his decision.

"Okay. Okay," he whispered, shaking out his hands at his sides.

Percy floated nearby, watching—or seeming to. For a fish with no eyebrows, he looked deeply concerned.

"Trust me, Percy," Luke added, even though he was doing anything but trusting himself. Still, it was better to sound confident, to give the kid something steady to hold onto.

Percy bobbed up and down once, then circled in place before settling near the sand again, staring at Luke with what looked like nervous energy, almost vibrating.

Luke took a deep breath—then started.

He closed his eyes and focused inward. The world falling away until, for a few brief moments, nothing existed except the pulse of energy inside him.

The lessons with Mercury surfaced in his mind as he guided the current to follow his will. The memory of the god's voice whispered at the edge of his mind, almost comforting.

The energy obeyed, smoother this time. Almost like it was being… guided. A river didn't need to be controlled, Luke realized, only directed. If he fought it, it would fight back. He had to convince it to flow where he needed it to go.

With the current steadied, Luke opened his eyes and looked at the glass. His mind worked a thousand kilometers a second. He understood boundaries, but liminality? That was a beast he didn't yet know how to tame.

Abigail's earlier words echoed back to him: *Inside and outside blurred together.* It hadn't made much sense then, and it didn't now, but it was all he had.

He focused, picturing the glass turning to smoke, something that could be crossed. It was almost like setting a boundary, but more metaphysical than anything he'd ever attempted—harder, too.

*Come on,* he chanted.

Sweat gathered at his brow from the effort of holding the energy in place. It was starting to protest, to strain against his grip.

It happened in a split second.

The glass shimmered, turning almost vaporous, like when Circe had sealed Percy in, as if the tank walls were made of mist, something anything could pass through.

Circe's version had been perfect; only her hands—and Percy—could cross. But Luke could hear the faint drip, drip of water, and the sound was quickening.

It took everything he had to keep it stable. Almost as hard as that night on the ship, holding a boundary over a whole vessel. That felt like forever ago, though it had only been a few days.

His legs trembled. He nearly buckled, but he widened his stance, grounding himself, heels locked against the floor.

"Come on, Percy—fast!" he gasped through clenched teeth, black spots crawling his vision.

Percy was coming—Luke saw the tell-tale swirl of the water, the ripples breaking toward him.

But then—

A larger wave rolled in.

Luke's blood ran cold.

"Fuck! Run, Percy! *Run*!" he shouted, voice cracking as the shark emerged from the dark, massive as ever, eyes dead and locked on its prey.

That hunger… it wasn't human. But for a moment Luke wondered, horrified, if there was still something of the man beneath it, or if Circe had already erased anything that made him a man.

Percy didn't hesitate. He darted forward, swimming as fast as he could. He was close—so close—but the shark was faster. Too fast for something that size. And it was gaining.

Luke clenched his jaw, desperation clawing up his throat. He tried to make the threshold smaller, but his focus slipped. The energy fought back, shoving against him like an immovable wall.

All he could do was watch as the shark closed the distance. Closer… closer—

Luke almost screamed as the creature's jaws opened, its teeth grazing the end of Percy's fish tail. Then, with a final desperate burst, Percy shot through the glass, flopping hard onto the floor.

Relief crashed through Luke, sharp and dizzying. For a heartbeat, he almost forgot to collapse the crossing point.

But as he pulled the power back, the shark surged forward with terrifying speed—and leapt through, too.

This time, it wasn't going for Percy.

It was going for *him.*

He felt the jolt of air as the creature passed him, so big that Luke toppled backward, landing hard on the floor. But he was intact, thank the Lord.

The shark, unlike Percy, didn't flop helplessly. It simply stared at them with its beady eyes, barely moving. Its gaping mouth worked for air, but even that seemed hesitant, like it wasn't sure it was allowed to breathe.

As if it only lived by Circe's will.

Cautiously, never taking his eyes off the thing, Luke pushed himself to his feet. He stepped backward, slow and steady, refusing to turn his back to it. Then he crouched, one hand sweeping the ground until his fingers brushed glass.

"Percy. Here," Luke said. He didn't bother with gentleness. He caught the fish in one hand, shoved the potion to his mouth, and tilted it until every drop of liquid disappeared inside.

Only when the vial was empty did he let go. He set Percy back down, then moved instinctively to stand between him and the shark.

For a moment, nothing happened.

A familiar panic jolted under Luke's skin. He reached for Percy, ready to grab him and run—

But then, it started.

And it was so much faster than the first transformation. Fish scales became skin, tail turned to legs, and the dull stared of a fish melted into Percy's dazed, blinking face.

Luke let out a shaky sigh. "Glad to have you back with us, fish brat. And the nickname fits like a glove now."

Percy didn't even muster a glare. He just looked up at Luke with wide, scared eyes.

And they were getting wet.

"Hey," Luke said immediately, pulling the boy into a side hug. "You're okay. I got you. Look—the ship's around. We just have to get out of here and join the others." He squeezed Percy's shoulders. "Everything's going to be fine."

The doors slammed open.

Both of them jolted.

But when he turned, it was Abigail's panicked face that greeted him. Her hair was a mess, eyes wide, then she froze, gaze snapping to the shark on the floor.

"...Okay, this is not good," she muttered, dragging a hand down her face. Then she pointed, not even stopping to explain. "Other potion. Force it down the shark. *Now*. If the Mistress finds her murder pet like this, we're dead. It'll be obvious someone was here."

"What—"

"She's coming, you dimwit!" Abigail threw her hands in the air and bolted forward, snatching a potion before Luke could even open his mouth.

"Abigail—!"

The shark's jaws opened, its massive body twisting, muscles coiling as it prepared to lunge. But Abigail, quicker than fear, hurled the vial straight into its mouth with perfect aim, and

darted back just as fast, survival instinct kicking in.

And just like Percy, the transformation began.

Luke had the awful impression this one was worse. Bones snapped. Flesh writhed. The air filled with wet, shrill sounds that made him wince. He grabbed Percy, covering the boy's ears and muttering for him not to look.

Then, silence.

Where the shark had been, a person now lay sprawled on the wet floor. Skin pale as milk. Hair so blonde it almost gleamed white. The flesh faintly blue. And the eyes—

Luke froze. He looked down at Percy. The same shade stared back.

*What the hell had they just uncovered?*

"Come on! We can't waste time, you morons!" Abigail screeched, her braids whipping around her as she stormed over to the man, who was trying—and failing—to stand.

"What the hell. That guy tried to eat me," Percy whispered beside him, but Luke barely registered it. He was too shocked to even form words, too busy staring.

He couldn't move, couldn't even yell at his sister for getting close to a clearly unstable man who had almost eaten a literal kid.

He just watched, dumbfounded, as Abigail reached the man. The guy struggled to stand, legs wobbling like he'd forgotten how to use them. Which made Luke wonder: how long had it been since this man was last *human*?

A flicker of instinct kicked in, as if his brain had finally caught up and remembered that the bloodthirsty shark and this man were the same being. And this being was *next to his sister.*

Luke tensed, ready to move, to pull Abigail back if the man so much as twitched wrong.

But… he didn't.

The man went with her quietly, his face blank, letting himself be pulled upright.

Now that Luke's brain was catching up, he realized the guy looked like something out of a nightmare. Slenderman, maybe, if Slenderman wore ancient Greek clothes.

The thought was so absurd it almost made Luke laugh.

*Almost*.

His gaze sharpened as Abigail marched the man closer, grimacing as if touching him was the most disgusting thing she'd ever done.

Luke shifted, automatically stepping in front of Percy, narrowing his eyes at the guy, who simply stared through him as though Luke weren't even there.

The man was about as tall as Hermes, he noted, his hand twitching with the instinct to reach for a sword that wasn't there. Lean and broad-shouldered—the build of a swimmer. Matted hair, dark circles, hollow face.

Sea-green eyes.

Luke had the horrible feeling that things were about about to get *much* more complicated.

Y'know*, just* a hunch.

Chapter End Notes

Cacete - Damn

Thank you all for reading! I read and cherish every single comment! ♥♥♥

End Notes

I also have a Discord if any of you are interested! https://discord.gg/utmrrmJ7t4

Works inspired by this one

To All The Boys I've Lost Before by HoneyComb391

Antihomophrosyne by the_mighty_macguffin

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!